

10

INFINITE STRATOS

YUMIZURU Izuru
Illustration: CHOCO





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INFINITE STRATOS IS 10

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Shirokishi leveled its blade at Houki.

[Battle me...]



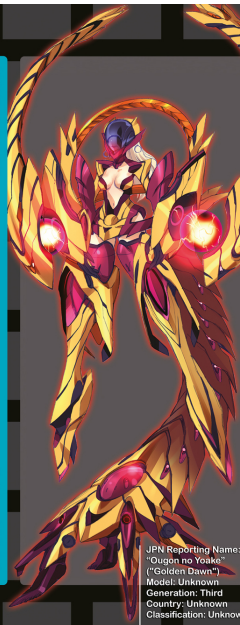
A harrowing clash was about to unfold.



Infinite Stratos 3D: Visualization of Stories







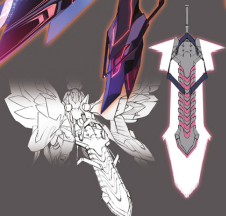
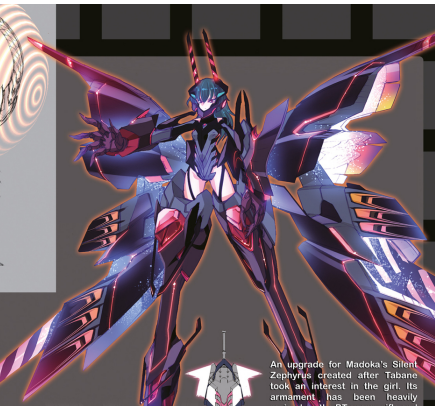
Squall's IS.
As befits its name, its armor glitters a vibrant gold color. The "Prominence" whips can, in addition to use as a weapon, be spun at a high speed for use as a shield. Further defensive capabilities are provided by the "Prominence Coat" heat barrier. Golden Dawn's tails are equipped with a claw for grappling, biting attacks, and use as a third arm in melee combat.

JPN Reporting Name:
"Ougen no Yōaka."
("Golden Dawn.")
Model: Unknown
Generation: Third
Country: Unknown
Classification: Unknown

Equipment: 2x "Prominence," Flame Whips
"Solid Flare," Superheated Flame Cannon
Heat Burst
Armor: Unknown

Meaning: Black Knight
Model: Unknown
Generation: Third
Country: Unknown
Classification:
High-Mobility Melee IS

Equipment: 2x Lancer Bits
"Fennir Blow," Large Buster Sword
Arm-Mounted Gatling Gun
Armor: Unknown



An upgrade for Madoka's Silent Zephyrus created after Tabane took an interest in the girl. Its armament has been heavily revised, the BT energy rifle and bits were replaced with two large lancer bits and a buster sword—giving it the silhouette of a butterfly. While Madoka's own disinterest in defense led to the removal of the Energy Umbrella shield, the ranged specialist turned high-firepower, close-in fighter is a perfect fit for Madoka; priding herself on her reflexes and IS aptitude.

Equipment: 2x Lancer Bits
"Fennir Blow," Large Buster Sword
Arm-Mounted Gatling Gun
Armor: Unknown

Daryl Casey Right



Left Forte Sapphire





Orimura Ichika

The only male in the world who can pilot an IS. Personal IS: Byakushiki



Shinonono Houki

Ichika's childhood friend.
Personal IS: Akatsubaki



Cecilia Alcott

The British National Cadet.
Personal IS: Blue Tears



Huang Lingyin

The Chinese National Cadet.
Personal IS: Shenlong



Charles Dunois

The French National Cadet.

Personal IS: Rafale Revive Custom II



Laura Bodewig

The German National Cadet.

Personal IS: Schwarzer Regen



Tatenashi Sarashiki

IS Academy Student Council President.

Personal IS: Mysterious Lady



Kanzashi Sarashiki

Japanese National Cadet.

Personal IS: Uchigane Nishiki

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Go West! Onward to Kyoto

Chapter II

*Double Classic! Sometimes Traditional,
Sometimes Elegant*

Chapter III

*Letters From the Inferno!
The Ancient Capital Burns*

Chapter IV

Girls On High! Spread Your Wings

Chapter V

Re:Kyoto! Return to Kyoto

Epilogue

Dragon's Kiss



Chapter I: Go West! Onward to Kyoto

On a brisk autumn day, Tatenashi stood at the podium before an IS Academy assembly. As she cleared her throat, the buzzing room fell silent in anticipation.

“Very well. I’d like to announce our fall field trip.”

Gasps of excitement fanned out across the crowd. The students at IS Academy may have been elite special forces on paper, but in the flesh, they were still blossoming teenage girls.

“With everything that’s happened these past few months, we’ve had to put off the autumn trip. And yet still, we can’t be sure that there’s no one else out there waiting for us.” For just a moment, her eyes hardened. Only a moment, not long enough for anyone to notice her departure from her usual indifference. “Therefore, the student council have selected an advance scouting team to visit Kyoto. The members will be the students with their own IS, led by Ms. Orimura and Ms. Yamada. That is all.”

The room erupted with girlish cries of “Lucky them!”, “That’s no fair giving them Orimura all to themselves!”, and “I wanna go too!” Houki, Charlotte, and Laura’s eyes lit up at the mention of Kyoto.

“Ooh, Kyoto! That’s an even better choice for history than Kanazawa!”

“It’ll be my first time. I can’t wait! How about you, Laura?”

“Yeah.”

Meanwhile, Cecilia and Ling were nonplussed.

“Why send me off on a silly little errand like that? I’m sure it simply *pales* in comparison with London, anyway.”

“Guh, Kyoto again? Why do the Japanese always have to go to Kyoto? This is gonna be my third time! Not just second—but third!”

Their displeasure was evident—until Tatenashi added one last thing, “Ling and Cecilia, you’ll be paired up on the trip with Ichika.” Suddenly, their eyes lit up too.

“Why, then it’s settled!”

“I guess I have to go! I really don’t want to, but I have to!”

Alongside Cecilia and Ling, who looked as revitalized as suffocating fish placed back in the water, Houki, Charl, and Laura wilted like salted spinach.

“Why do Cecilia and Rin—”

“—get to tag along with Ichika?”

“...Understood. Returning to class.”

Oh, and there was one other. Kanzashi, in her role as Ichika's scheduling assistant, had already been given the assignment to go with Orimura. *I should stay quiet for now.* Without even thinking, her fingers twisted into thumbs-up.



"Ichika, dear."

"Ichika!"

Cecilia and Ling caught Ichika on his way back to class after the assembly. They pressed in from either side, a whirlwind of feminine insistence.

"We've certainly got a big job ahead of ourselves."

"You're telling me. Oh, hey, Ichika, while I'm there, maybe I'll dress like a geisha. That sounds right up your alley too, Cecilia."

"Oh my. That's certainly an intriguing suggestion," Cecilia giggled.

"Isn't it? Ahaha."

Houki, Charlotte, and Laura, though, were there to break their reverie.

"Hold it! Just because we're split up in two groups doesn't mean you can have him all for your—er, doesn't mean you're going to be there to play around!"

"Yeah! There's got to be a section in the anti-monopoly law about—I mean, just, um, really!"

"Indeed. My bride is *mine*."

Before either of Cecilia or Ling could fire back with 'and what're you gonna do about it?', Ichika spoke up, "She's right. This isn't gonna be a sightseeing tour."

Whatever disagreements the five had, they were united in their stunned reaction to Ichika's sudden seriousness.

"Uh... What?"

"Ichika, do you have a fever?"

"Have you been getting enough sleep lately?"

"Hmm. Maybe you need a good Bundeswehr-style massage."

"Perhaps an evening tea with me would help take your mind off the worries of the day so you could sleep soundly."

All Ichika could do was sigh, "Seriously... You know what, never mind."

Only Ichika had been told by Tatenashi of the true purpose of this trip. It wasn't just to scout out the area, but to neutralize a Phantom Task cell discovered in Kyoto. *I hope this turns out okay...* The more he remembered Tatenashi's grin, the more doubts he was beginning to have. But still, he believed that the others could handle it. At least, he wanted to believe.

"Um... Sorry to mention it so late, but I'll be along with him too."

The crowd's heads slowly swiveled toward a sorrowful Kanzashi.
"I-I didn't forget about you!"
"N-Nor did I!"
"Yeah!"
"That's fine."
"It's okay..."
She wanted to scream that they *had* forgotten her.



"And now, let me tell you what you'll really be there for."
Tatenashi had gathered the students with their own IS—not just the first years, but also second year Forte Sapphire, and third year Daryl Casey. "Now that Forte and Daryl are back, we'll be able to commit all our firepower to this operation."

Whispers flew between the first years as the word 'firepower' came up. Tatenashi, true to form, quieted them with a fan gesture; her experience as student council president served her well here.

"Phantom Task, ain't it. Blahhhh."

"And *where* might you have heard that?"

"Back in Greece. Overheard someone." Forte, lounging spread out on a sofa, was characteristically laconic. Her long hair was put up, if you could call it that, in a thick braid which twined around her neck. Her figure was on the slender side, an impression not helped by her usual slouch.

"So you're saying it's time to kick some ass?"

Daryl leaned against the wall, a bit too practicedly to have just been where she found herself. She was a tall girl—no, young woman—with her blonde hair tied back at the nape of her neck; her ramrod-straight posture only made her look even taller. Her assertive self-confidence was only matched by the matching F-cups perched on her crossed arms.

"I figured something was up when they bumped my Hellhound up to 2.8."

The third year ace, full of nonchalant confidence, was the kind of girl who may have been stylish, but also more than made up for the lack of boys in her class.

"So, to be completely blunt: you're going to be staging an attack on an international terrorist organization. I'll handle the intelligence side; I need you to handle the fighting." Tatenashi's suddenly serious tone sent tingles down their spines, tingles which quickly hardened into determination. "Now get ready for departure. Dismissed!"

"Yes, ma'am!" There was an intensity in Ichika and the first years' answer, born from the thrill of their first real mission—against Phantom Task, no less.

“...Is how it was supposed to be.” A day later, Ichika half-shouted at the gaggle of girls who’d dragged him to a shopping mall. “Why are you acting like this is just some kind of vacation?!”

It was a constant barrage of let’s-try-that-food, how-about-that-makeup, that-bag-looks-great, let’s-buy-something-to-play, a whirlwind of self-expression which left Ichika’s head spinning.

“Well, you know.”

“We don’t get to do this often.”

“It’d be a waste not to have some fun.”

“It’s not like we’ve forgotten about the mission, you know?”

“Exactly.”

“Mm...”

No one could quite bring themselves to make eye contact with Ichika.

“At least look me in the eye when you say that!” Ichika’s cries fell on deaf ears.



Finally, a trip for two with Ichika... Ahh, Lady Luck smiles upon me! Cecilia had stolen away from the group, and now, alone, was lost in thought. *A day seeing the sights, and then a night... Oh, what a night!* Cecilia’s mind raced, and as it did, she bumped into someone.

“Oh, pardon me.” It was Ling, doing the same thing.



Seeing Kyoto together with Ichika! This is my chance! It’s gotta be! Just like Cecilia, Ling had wandered off to be alone with her fantasies. *A lunch date, a quick wedding, dinner, and then... A night to remember...* A bump, as she ran into Cecilia.

“Sorry! Oh... it’s you, Cecilia. What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing. Weren’t you done shopping, Ling?”

“Oh, I just realized I forgot something, so I was going to pick it up here.”

“Why, I was just about to do the same.”

Cecilia laughed a snooty ‘Ohohoho.’

Ling laughed an ‘Ahahaha’ with just as much conceit behind it.

“Oooohohoho!”

“Ahahahaha!”

Their laughs filled the lingerie shop.



“Heeey.”

Tokyo Station, just before the bullet train’s departure. But all of Laura’s attention was focused on a shop.

“Excuse me. I’d like one of your boxed lunches. What do you have that’s nutritious and easy to— Wait, a chick? What’s a chick doing here?”

The famous Tokyo Station confection caught her eye.

“It...” Staring up from the showcase’s prime position at Laura was a golden-brown confection in the shape of a chick. “It’s adorable...”

Her cheeks tinged rose, Laura leaned in at the clerk and said, “I’ll take all you have! Don’t worry, I can afford it!”

In her hand was not a black card, but a Schwarzer Hase card.

“Laura! The train’s gonna leave! Hurry up!”

“W-Wait, Ichika! Rescuing a chick in danger is a soldier’s highest duty! Ahh, my chick! My chick! Someone else is going to buy my chick!”

Choooooooooooo! The train cold-bloodedly announced its impending departure.

“Phew, we made it.” Ichika, whose job as student council VP was to herd the others, let out a sigh of relief. Too soon, perhaps, as a hand suddenly wrapped around his neck.

“Ichika! A bride like you—” It was, of course, Laura, the veil of half-dried tears in her eyes telling the tragic story of her parting with the chick.

“Ghhg! Stop it! You’re gonna kill me!” Ichika’s face began to turn a ghastly purple.

Realizing that things were going too far, Charlotte stepped in, “Laura, Ichika just stopped you from wasting money.”

“Wasting?! How is that a waste? And it’s my money to begin with, isn’t it?”

“Think of it this way, it’s just a little more you’ve got saved up for your wedding.” Realizing what she’d just said, Charlotte pressed her hand to her mouth, but it was too late. Laura’s eyes sparkled as she released Ichika’s neck.

“Our wedding! You’re right! I can’t break the bank! Mm-hm!”

“Jeez...” Watching Laura happily imagine her honeymoon with Ichika, the others looked on disapprovingly.

“*Cough, cough!* I thought I was gonna die!” As Ichika tried to catch his breath, someone slung a can of juice at him. “Whoa!”

He barely caught the ice-cold can of orange juice.

“Drink up.” That blunt, to-the-point approach had to be Forte Sapphire. Grateful for the consideration, Ichika tried to open the can... But something wasn’t quite right.

“Huh? Hmm.”

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get it open. Confused, he shook the can and heard nothing. Wouldn't there normally be something sloshing around?

"This is pretty cold—oww!" It wasn't just cold, it was frozen solid. His hand, too, was chilled to the bone. "What the heck is this?!"

"Hahaha. Gotcha!"

Daryl, sitting next to Forte with her legs crossed, chimed in, "Don't you know Forte's IS' name?"

It was 'Cold Blood,' and it lived up to its name.

"It can slow movement on the molecular level and freeze things."

"C'mon, don't tell him! That's a spoiler! A spoiler!" Forte's normal reticence didn't stop her from repeating herself in insistence, and Daryl, laughing, recrossed her legs.

"Ahahaha. What's the big deal? Ah... You just saw my panties, didn't you? Tee-hee."

"Well, um..." Daryl watched amusedly as Ichika squirmed. (By the way, they were red.)

"You're a little perv, aren't you."

"Ugh... Aren't you the one who flashed me?!"

But she had no interest in giving him room to make excuses.

"Oh. Hmm. I guess."

As Ichika turned away, he noticed the horrified gazes of the first years upon him.

"W-Wait! Really! It wasn't like that!"

As he flailed for an excuse, Charlotte elbowed him in the side.

"...Ichika, you pervert. I am so done with you."

The ride from there to Shizuoka was passed in silence.

"H-How's this my fault?!" Sadly, no one was willing to answer.



"We will make a brief stop at Kyoto. *Mamonaku Kyoto, Kyoto desu.*" The bullet train announced its stops in English and Japanese, for the convenience of foreign vacationers. Hearing the announcement, everyone found their bags.

"Huh? Where'd it—"

"What's the holdup, Ichika? We're here! We're at Kyoto!" Ling confusedly watched Ichika rummage through his things.

"Oh, there it is!" Ichika pulled out a well-loved film camera. In an era where even phones could take high-quality digital pictures, it seemed almost comically out of date. But Ling understood how important it was to him, and held back on the needling.

"You still use that?"

"Huh? Yeah, I feel like it brings me closer to Chifuyu."

"Mm. You're right."

It was the camera that had taken the pictures in their family album, and had kind of taken on a symbolism of that bond. It had seen Ling and Houki's childhoods, too. Knowing how troubled Ichika's family life was, Ling watched with nothing but tenderness. Her eyes held a kindness very close to someone looking at a lover, a brother, or child. Somehow, he was a little bit of each to her. The others, if asked, may have held the same thoughts, but right now, they burned brightest in Ling.

"Why, Ling! Surely there's enough Ichika for all of us?" Cecilia was the first to butt in. Elbowing her way to Ichika's side, she wove her arm around his. "Ichika? This is my first time in Kyoto. Do be a gentleman and escort me."

"Uhh, Cecilia, could you give me a little space?" Ichika nervously protested as he felt her breasts press into his arm.

Watching, Ling couldn't help but be frustrated and spoke up, "Hey, Ichika. I looked up the gelato stand we went to when we came in middle school, and they're still in business. Let's go together."

"Wait, but—"

Ling pressed her hand into Ichika's palm like a lover would on a walk. As he felt her tiny, delicate fingers, Ichika's pulse began to pound. *Man, what's going on? I can't stop thinking about Cecilia and Rin lately...* Whether they could tell what he was thinking or not, either way, the two pressed in on him.

"Ichika. Shall we be going now?"

"Let's go, Ichika."

Squish.

Rub.

Squish.

Rub.

"Gah! Can you back off for a minute?!"

Ling and Cecilia shot him confused looks as they blushinglly snatched their arms back.

"Ichika?"

"Ichika?"

As they did, Daryl shoved him in the back with her gym bag.

"Such a little perv."

"I am not!"

"Riiiiiiight, sure you aren't."

The train slowed to a halt. As they stepped onto the platform, they were greeted with a display showing the local specialties.

"Ooh. Let's get a photo together in front of this."

Surprisingly, Chifuyu agreed, "That's a good idea. Something to remember this by."

"Are you sure, Ms. Orimura?" Even Ichika had finally learned not

to call her Chifuyu in front of the others.

They lined up for the camera.

“All right, I’ll take the picture.”

“Whaa?”

“Huh?” Just as Ichika was about to press the shutter, Ling stomped up to him. “You’ve gotta be in it, too! Here! Ms. Yamada, you take it!”

At first, Maya was flustered by suddenly having the camera pressed upon her, but seeing Chifuyu’s apologetic grin, she relaxed.

“Okay, here goes. Say cheese!”

Snap! went the shutter. Another moment of Ichika’s memories captured. Perhaps the last everyone here would appear together in...



“All right, let’s get this started!”

Ichika was raring to go, but Tatenashi blasely corrected him, “Actually, don’t worry about it. You may as well see the sights today.”

“Huh?”

“I’m still waiting on our informant. I haven’t been able to get in touch with her since yesterday. I’m going to go look for her. She’s likely in Kyoto, so I expect that she’ll try to find me.”

“Eh?”

Tatenashi winked at the confused Ichika and said, “Just have your fun. Leave it to me, it’ll be fine.”

“O-Okay...”

“And aren’t there some pictures you’d like to take?”

“Well... Yeah.” Ichika had barely touched the camera since he entered IS Academy, but it was the first thing Chifuyu had ever bought for him, so it was still very special. It had captured memory after memory—almost described their relationship.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it.”

“Yeah, I guess...”

“Well, get going then!”

Ichika reluctantly nodded. But he wasn’t one to dwell on things, and soon enough, he was heading out to the tourist attractions with the girls, looking forward to a day of photography.

“All right, Ichika! Why don’t we walk around together?” That was, of course, Ling. The others, though, had been waiting with bated breath for someone to broach the subject, and quickly staked their own claims.

“No fair, Ling! He should come with me instead!”

“Now wait right there! Was it not my idea to begin with?”

“No, it was mine. I can’t let my bride wander off alone.” Laura nodded to punctuate her insistence. Above the insistent demand, though, one person came up with a compromise.

“Why don’t we all go to different places? I mean, we were supposed to split up into groups of two anyway,” Charlotte suggested.

“I guess? I don’t mind.”

Charlotte chuckled, “If it’s fine with you, Mr. Cameraman.”

“I just hope I do my subjects justice.” Their banter, though, was cut short by another round of ‘Me! Me!’

“You can take a picture of me, Ichika.”

“Get me, Ichika!”

“You know I was a model in England.”

“Ah, Ichika. I’m sure whatever you choose will be wonderful.”

“Ichika... Don’t forget me...”

The pressure of hearing his own name over and over was beginning to get to him.

“Okay, okay, fine, I get it! Just pair up!”

As Kanzashi frowned, Charlotte wrapped an arm around her.

“I’ll go with Kanzashi.”

“Ah... Thanks...”

Everyone was impressed by her concern for Kanzashi’s difficulty in pairing up.

“Then I’ll go with Ling.”

“The childhood friends team, huh. Works for me.”

Houki and Ling.

“Which would leave myself and Laura.”

“Looks like it. Let’s enjoy ourselves.”

Last but not least, Cecilia and Laura.

“Anyway, we’ll head out after we decide on our spots. Ichika, you can go ahead, we’ll text you.”

“Got it. See you later, then.”

As Charlotte and the others waved goodbye, Ichika ambled down the road. This being autumn in Kyoto, there were throngs of sightseers around.

“Well, this is a mess. Guess I should take a detour.” Ducking down an alleyway between two houses, Ichika spotted a white cat staring at him. “.....?”

It mewed as if beckoning him to follow, and he did, almost as if entranced. *I wonder where it’s going to lead me.* Passing out of the alley, he found himself following a narrow back street, then climbing a flight of stairs. Before he’d noticed, 30 minutes had passed.

Okay, that’s about enough. Charl should be texting me any minute. Just then, the cat leapt into the air.

“There you are, Shiny.” A woman, who must have been the cat’s owner, called out what must have been its name.

Her appearance was striking. Over one eye, she wore the handguard of a katana in the same way as Date Masamune. Her

kimono was peeled back from her shoulders, open so low as to be nearly indecent. And attached to her right shoulder was nothing but a scarred stump. The one-armed, one-eyed woman puffed from a long pipe.



She's not Japanese, is she? Not with hair that red. That much was obvious. Her height, which would have been unbelievable for a Japanese woman, was only accentuated by the stiletto heels which provided a counterpoint to her kimono.

"Well, well. You look like trouble."

"Huh?"

Another deep puff, purple smoke swirling around the mature beauty. Ichika was at a loss, having never been in a situation like this.

"Mmm. How should I put it? Woman trouble, usually. With a chance of bullets. It's written all over your face."

"...Huh?"

"Take care of yourself, you hear? Anyway—"

The cat perched on her shoulder, she spun around her kimono, as red as her hair, and made her exit.

"What the heck was that?" The sound of an incoming text stirred Ichika from his reverie.

[Ichika, we found a patisserie and it looks absolutely scrumptious. See you there!]

The included map, complete with 'Here!' circled in red, was definitely a Charl touch.

"All right, now to type that into Maps..." With cell phones what they were now, all he had to do was feed it the address and it would find the quickest route. Watching the projection display out of the corner of his eye, Ichika set off.

"Hmm... Ah, that's some beautiful foliage."

Snap. As he made his way there, Ichika snapped landscape after landscape on his film camera.



"Hey, Ichika! Over here!" Charlotte waved her arm energetically. Next to her, Kanzashi tentatively raised her hand.

"Oh, wow!"

What caught Ichika's eye was their kimono— Charl's a bright orange, Kanzashi's a cool, relaxing pale blue. Each was printed with the crimson leaves of autumn, Charl's hanging from branches as Kanzashi's floated on the 'water' of her outfit. Each had a matching, calming beige belt.

"Ahaha, awesome! The guy selling candy was giving out free samples to girls wearing kimono! Thanks so much for picking one for me, and doing my hair to match."

"I... I mean, everyone probably knows that much..." That kind of self-deprecation definitely marked her as just as much a Sarashiki as Tatenashi was.

"Really, though. I can't believe how well it works on me. Mind if

we get a picture?" Charl giggled. "Mr. Cameraman. If you don't mind."

"I'll do my best..." Embarrassedly, Ichika raised his camera. "All right, here I go. Say cheese!"

Charl looked confused as the shutter snapped and said, "Cheese?" "Huh?"

"Why is it cheese, anyway?"

"Why? I dunno, but she probably does." Even Kanzashi was a little confused when Ichika made her think about it.

"I'm not sure. A tradition, I guess?" she replied.

"I thought the Japanese didn't really like cheese though."

"I mean, uhhh..." Charlotte didn't mean anything offensive by it, but that was still a pretty awkward comment for Ichika and Kanzashi. If only because it had them wondering about *why*, exactly, 'cheese' was the word.

"I mean, I guess since you're French, you'd know more about cheese, but..."

"Wait, really? I mean, I've made it before, but..." Charlotte cupped her chin in a palm.

"Wait, Charl, you know how to make cheese?"

"That's amazing!"

As the Japanese duo lit up, she awkwardly tried to wave them off.

"No, no, it's not like you think! I just did something in Home Ec, it's not like I'm an expert or anything!" Charlotte just couldn't stand both Ichika and Kanzashi looking up at her, their eyes twinkling, and she tried to change the subject. "What's that compared to being able to tell which fish are good? I guess all Japanese people can do that."

"Eh?!"

Their sweetfish skewers must have given her the wrong idea.

"N-No way! We can't really do that, right, Kanzashi?"

"Well, umm... I mean, I can..." Kanzashi awkwardly flashed a V-sign. "Can't you, Ichika?"

"Uh, I mean, I can't do it like an expert, but I guess I can pick out good things for dinner."

"What do you mean 'like an expert,' Ichika?"

"Umm... Like, blowfish and stuff?" Ichika was just waiting for the 'oh, you mean someone who literally needs a license' from Charlotte or Kanzashi.

"Anyway, why don't we try out some of the desserts? The mochi dumplings look great."

"They looked absolutely mouthwatering." All else aside, Kanzashi couldn't be wrong about something like that, and Ichika ducked under the red curtain of the cart selling them before sitting down.

"Hey, let me get a picture of the two of you eating them."

“Really? Of *that*?”

“Yes, Charlotte. It’ll be a way to remember our trip.” It was rare for Kanzashi to be so insistent, and Charlotte nodded.

“Well, what if I said ‘please,’ Mr. Cameraman?”

“Okay!” Ichika lined up the two of them in front of a grove of bamboo in the viewfinder, then looked up.

“Wait, what’s wrong?” Charlotte looked at him quizzically.

“I... I just think it could be more striking.”

“Striking?”

“Like, you mean...” She tilted her head as she waited for Ichika’s answer.

“I know! Why don’t you feed each other? It’d be really cute!” Charlotte and Kanzashi weren’t quite sure what he meant, but the implications were enough to make them blush.

“Oh, really, you’re into that, Ichika?”

“Are you sure we’re not overthinking this?”

“Nah, it’ll be perfect!” Ichika tried to distract them from what they were thinking about his motivations with a pair of dumpling skewers, dripping with sauce.

“Ichika, you pervert...”

“You’re a creep. Not that I mind.”

Blushes from both sides.

“Okay, here goes.”

“Hold on a sec!”

“Charlotte, if you keep waving that around you’re going to get sauce—eek!”

The sauce from Charl’s dumplings went flying onto Kanzashi’s face. Seeing his chance, Ichika hit the shutter.



“Oh, wow, this one’s great!”

“What?! No, no! Delete that one, Ichika!”

“Uh, I mean, it’s a film camera... He’s gonna have to at least have it processed...”

“And a couple more!”

Snap! Snap! Snap! The lens of the camera gleamed as he shot over and over. Whether he was serious about it or not, though, Charlotte and Kanzashi weren’t enthused about being the butt of the joke.

“C’mon, Ichika, did you really have to?”

“That’s pushing it.”

Angrily, they stuffed each of their skewers into his mouth. If nothing else, it gave new meaning to ‘verbal abuse.’

“Gwmp?!” With two skewers in his mouth, Ichika could barely breathe. “I can’t breathe! Agh!”

“Whatever.”

“Serves you right.”

Charlotte and Kanzashi both spun away, disgusted with Ichika. All he could do was put the camera away.

Chapter II: Double Classic!

Sometimes Traditional, Sometimes Elegant

“That was so mean...” Ichika was still coughing as he walked with Ling and Houki. Houki on the left, Ling on the right. Flowers in both hands, indeed.

“If you managed to annoy Charlotte and Kanzashi, of all people, you probably deserved it.”

“Yeah. Ichika, you really need to learn to keep it in your pants.”

“Hey, all I did was take a picture! I’m the victim here!”

Yeah, no one was buying it.

“.....”

“.....”

“You don’t have to give me the silent treatment! C’mon, don’t be so mean!”

It was, of course, his own fault.

“Anyway, where are we going?”

Ling was kind enough to answer Ichika’s change of subject, “We’re in Kyoto, right? So we’ve gotta go to Kamogawa!”

Ling pointed a finger dead ahead—toward the banks of the Kamogawa river, otherwise known as the hottest date spot in town. It was sure to be swarming with couples.

“Yeah! Definitely Kamogawa!” Houki nodded in unison.

“Mhm. So— I can get the pictures now, then?” Ichika rounded the viewfinder on Houki.

“Wait, hold on a minute! You’re just trying to get away from us as quick as you can, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, Ichika! Don’t you want to have some fun?”

“I guess. Hey, there’s an open spot over there, why don’t we sit down?” Ichika let the camera hang around his neck as he sat down. “I’ve only got one handkerchief, though. Houki, Ling, which one of you wants it?”

“Oh, I’m fine.”

“Me too.”

Both of them were happy just with Ichika thinking of it.

The three quietly sat, listening to the murmur of the river. Flower in each hand or no, nothing rose to Ichika’s tongue.

“C’mon, say something, Ichika!” At Ling’s prompting, he suddenly managed to come up with a topic.

“Oh, right! Didn’t we roast sweet potatoes in the fallen leaves once? That’s a really fall thing.”

“Ichika...” The more enthusiastically he spoke, the more Houki’s face clouded. Not least because of her memories of roasting sweet potatoes in fallen leaves with him at Shinonono Shrine. Whether or not it was a good idea for the two, with Chifuyu and Tabane and her parents gone, to be tending a fire together.

“It’s not hot enough, we should put in more leaves!”

This did not turn out as they planned. Ichika was officially banned by Chifuyu from ever roasting sweet potatoes again, in fact.

“Huh? What happened?”

“Oh, whatever! Stop bringing up stuff from back then!”

And it was a given that Houki wouldn’t want to hear about it. Chifuyu may well have been a demon, with how angry she got. Houki would certainly never forget her face.

“Wait, that mess when we tried to roast chestnuts wasn’t your first time?”

“Ahahaha...”

“‘Ahaha’ isn’t an answer!” Ling blanched as she thought back to it. “Chifuyu was piiiiiiissed, too. I don’t think I’ll ever forget her face.”

That was in sixth grade. It was Ichika’s idea, when he found a pile of wild chestnuts while they were raking up outside their elementary school.

“These are tasty if we roast them!”

Ling hadn’t disagreed, per se, but the fire was definitely Ichika’s idea.

“It’s not hot enough, we should put in more leaves!”

After that, Chifuyu had banned Ichika from fires, completely, for life. And Ling would never forget her face then, either.

“Yeah, not a lot of good memories about bonfires.”

“Agreed.”

Good kids should never light a fire without an adult present.

“It’s pretty chilly along riverbanks at this time of year.”

“Should we go somewhere else, then?”

“No, wait! That’s not what I meant...”

“.....?”

Ling and Houki kept Ichika from leaving as they opened up a private channel between each other.

“What the hell are you doing?! This is our chance to get Ichika for ourselves!”

“I know, I know! But... I just, I’m just a little nervous...” They each glanced over at Ichika.

“It is chilly, isn’t it.”

“Yeah. It is,” they intoned, as if trying to make a point, as Ichika stood up.

“I know! Hold on a sec!” Suddenly, he ran off toward the nearby shopping district. Ling and Houki could only watch in shock.

“What the hell is he doing?! Where’s he going?!”

“It wasn’t my fault!”

“Then whose was it?!”

“Grrrrr...”

“Grrrrrrrrrrrrr...”

As they glared at each other, Ichika came trotting back.

“Sorry about that. Here you go.” He plopped matching hats on their heads. Berets, to fit over Ling’s twin tails and Houki’s ponytail.



“That should warm you up.”

Ling and Houki weren't sure how to react to the sudden presents.

“Umm...”

“How much were they?”

“It's no big deal. I have a budget from the student council, it's more than enough.”

They had no answer to Ichika's gleaming smile.

“Th-Thanks, I guess... I really needed one of those.”

“Yeah. I'll have to wear it on weekends. Yeah, that'll work.”

“Hahaha, oh, and— Lemme get a picture!”

Unenthusiastically or not, Ichika managed to get Ling and Houki to line up in front of the river.

“Say cheese!”

As the shutter snapped, an awkward smile floated to each of their faces.



“All right, Laura and Cecilia, you two are up next. Where are we going?” Ichika had no sooner sent the text when a rickshaw skidded to a halt in front of him. “Whoa! What the—”

He couldn't help but yelp in surprise. As he did, voices from inside called out to him, “We've arrived to pick you up, Ichika.”

“Get in!”



Two young blonde ladies in full regal gowns, their smiles glimmering as brightly as tiaras, looked out at him. The violet of their dresses was as vivid as the red autumn leaves beneath the shawls wrapped around their shoulders.

“Hey, you look great. Dresses in Kyoto are a nice contrast. Hold on, lemme get a picture.” Ichika snapped the shutter, trying to capture the image of the two in a rickshaw as Cinderellas in a carriage... And then, suddenly realized something.

“*Huff... Puff...*” The man gasping for air between the poles of the rickshaw had a suspiciously-familiar shock of red hair.

“Hold it, Dan? Dan, is that you? What the hell are you doing all the way out here?!”

“Oh, hey. I got a job that took me out here... Had to because of, you know... Well, you remember from your birthday party. Can’t believe my past is already catching up with me, ahahaha.”

“Don’t just laugh something like that off! C’mon, we need you around to keep an eye on Ran. She’s growing up fast, you know?”

“You’re the last guy in the world I wanted to hear *that* from.”

A third mouth opened, about to interject its own opinion in the two boys’ half-argument—the muzzle of a ‘meter’ Mauser C96 with a jaw-droppingly elongated barrel.

“You’d think you were happier to see him than us. Hurry up and get in, Ichika.”

“Okay, okay, fine! Just, where did you get that huge thing?!”

“Oh, this? I just did a fashion shoot in Germany the other day, and they gave me it to use then. It’s fully-operational, of course.”

“‘Fully-operational, of course’?! Don’t you mean it’s just a prop, of course?!”

“Hmm. It may as well be, I guess. I’m not a fan of anything this long. It’s less functional.”

“Oh? I rather like it. After all, it’s got such a history behind it.”

“Is that some kind of joke?”

“No, just that it’s an antique. I meant it purely in a good way.”

“Hm. But this is a replica. There’s no history there.”

“Sometimes it’s more about the form than the actual piece. And it’s beautifully-made, now, isn’t it?”

“Aha. Of course.”

Ichika nodded, amazedly, to himself as he watched Cecilia and Laura play off each other. *Cecilia and Laura get along better than I expected.*

“Come now, Ichika. Get in.”

“Huh? Don’t rickshaws normally have two seats?”

“This one seats three. Isn’t that right, Mr. Gotanda?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am...” Dan just couldn’t deal with Cecilia turning on

her full self-assuredness. It can't have helped that he must have been working in Kyoto trying to keep up with the financial expectations of Nohotoke Utsuho, but that's another story for another time.

"All right."

Cecilia and Laura shimmied to the sides of the bench, opening a space for Ichika between them, then simultaneously raised their fingers just as they'd rehearsed.

"All right, Gotanda Dan! Take it safe, take it slow, and take us around Kyoto on the curviest route you know!"

Laura pressed the muzzle of her gun to the back of Dan's head. This didn't exactly make him enthused, but the promise the two had made of a large tip at the end of the ride made his eyes light up with dollar signs.

"All right! I'll do it! Wait for me, Utsuho!" Calling out his love's name, Dan jerked the rickshaw upright. He wasn't known as the 'sleeping lion' of his middle school track team for nothing. Or even just for sleeping through practices, although he definitely did plenty of that too. "Let's go!"

Pulling his headband tighter, Dan began to pull. Ichika was surprised as he felt the world move beneath him.

"C'mon, Dan, you don't have to—"

"Oh my! Did you feel that shake?"

"We'd better hold on tight." Bewilderment set in on Ichika's face as Cecilia and Laura each grabbed an arm.

"I don't think it's going to be that bad—"

You could almost, almost make out a pinch of embarrassment, and the realization that even Ichika realized what was going on spurred the girls on further.

"We wouldn't want you to slip, Ichika! Why don't you put your arms around our waists?"

He wasn't sure how to deal with them being so direct, and he didn't have time to think about it as Dan's 'safe' driving swung them around a curve.

"Whoa!" Pulled by centrifugal force, Ichika found himself wrapping around Cecilia. Their eyes met for a split second.

"I-Ichika..."

"Cecilia, I'm not, I just—"

The honeymoon lasted for only a few moments before he was pulled over to Laura's side. Even as he fought to keep himself upright instead of pressing down on Laura, it just turned into more and more of an embrace.

"Ichika, why do you have to be so sudden..."

"No, Laura, I just can't—"

Ichika swung back and forth between them in the swaying

rickshaw.

“C’mon, Dan! I thought they told you to keep it slow and safe!”

“U—”

“U?”

“UTSUHOOOOOO! I’m working my hardest! I’ll do my best!”

Ichika gave up on Dan, and resigned himself to wrapping an arm each around Laura and Cecilia.

“I-Ichika?!”

“Ichika?!”

Their faces lit up with blushes, but Ichika, seemingly obliviously, handed his camera to Cecilia and said, “Let’s get a picture of the three of us together.”

Hearing that, Cecilia and Laura’s eyes gleamed.

“Ah, that would be simply wonderful!”

“Yeah, it really would.”

Inside the swaying rickshaw, the three struggled for a steady picture. This would surely be a memory that would never fade.



“She’s late.” Chifuyu, waiting with Maya at a bus stop, was beginning to get annoyed. She wasn’t used to being kept waiting.

“Well, you know how Europeans are with time.”

“I’d like that to be the problem, but...”

“But what?”

Chifuyu, her arms crossed, tapped her fingers and replied, “She’s just dumb enough to get the party started all on her own.”

She brought her palm to her chin, as if watching for trouble. And as if on cue, there was a sudden roaring blast. It had to be a deliberate explosion.

“Eeek! Ms. Orimura! What’s going on?!”

“Let’s go, Maya. We’ve got business to take care of.”

“Y-Yes!” Maya clasped her hands to her chest nervously as she watched the billowing smoke. *Ichika... Everyone... I hope you’re okay...* Seeing her visibly nervous, Chifuyu clapped a palm on her back.

“Don’t worry. After all, I *am* Brynhildr... And *she’s* here, too.” Chifuyu’s gaze was clear as she stared off into the distance.

Ten minutes prior—

“All right, now I just need a few pictures of the city for the others,” Ichika relaxedly commented as he viewed the old town through his viewfinder. As he did, the sleeve of a kimono covered his lens.

“Get back.”

“Huh?”

The woman's left arm moved too quick for him to see. With a clang, something bounced off her pipe.

"Bu-Bullets?!" Ichika could see them piled on the ground.

"More incoming."

Clang! Clang! More bullets fell to the ground before her.

Ichika, confused, wavered, "Wh-Who are you? You're that lady from before, right? With the cat?"

"Alicia Giosestaf. Call me Allie." She turned her head to face Ichika, and winked, making it clear she was anything but a normal person by continuing to bat bullets out of the air.

"What's going on?!"

"Huh? They're trying to assassinate you. Looks like you're popular in all the wrong ways, Orimura Ichika. Anyway, time to take this seriously!" As she shouted, she was enveloped in light. The light of an IS materializing.

"Wait, is that Tempesta?!" The legendary IS, runner-up in the first Mondo Grosso and winner of the second. *But what happened to her arm?* Ichika had seen her missing an arm and eye before.

As he wondered, Allie grinned at him and said, "Yeah, sometimes shit happens. But Tempesta's just as ready as ever!"

Machinery wrapped into bone, into flesh. A prosthetic arm of IS technology, easily plucking bullets out of the air as they rained down.

Half a kilometer away—

"And that's a failure. That little horndog sure is good at wrapping women around his finger." Behind the scope was IS Academy third year, Daryl Casey.

"Wh-What are we doing?" Forte, still not understanding why she'd been brought along, wavered.

"What? We're assassinating Orimura Ichika, of course."

"Assassinating him? What's going on?!"

Her trusted friend. Her reliable mentor. ...Her lover. Forte's world was crumbling around her.

"My code name is Rain Meusel. Last of the Meusels."

"Rain... Meusel..."

Rain laughed it away as if it were nothing. The same aloof confidence as always... It was enough to bring tears to Forte's eyes.

"But why? Why are you with Phantom Task? Why are we betraying everyone?" Forte's confused voice was thin, plaintive.

"Why? Who knows. Maybe it's fate, I guess. My family's curse."

Another laugh. With more than a little regret and self-loathing sprinkled in. The wind howled around them, on the rooftop of a building.

"If she didn't know where we were before, she sure does now. Time to make up your mind."

“Make up my mind?”

“You know what about.” Whether to stay at IS Academy or go with Rain.

“Let’s turn traitor. To the whole world, if need be.”

The words sounded so sweet. Almost cloyingly sweet, as Forte clutched her head in confusion and cowered.

“There, there.” Rain wrapped her arms around Forte.



“Come with me, Forte. Let’s tear it down.”

“Tear it down?”

“Yeah. Tear down this rotten world. Tear down my family’s curse.”

Suddenly, she pressed her lips against Forte’s. Forte stood stunned for a few seconds, before shaking her head, pushing Rain away.

“I... I can’t... It’s just... Just...”

“That’s okay. Goodbye, Forte. I’ll miss you.”

Another laugh cut short, the bitterness within making Forte’s heart ache. She had to betray someone. She knew. She knew too well. IS Academy, or Rain. She had to choose one, and one alone.

“Time to get going. Let’s go, Hellhound!” As Rain shouted, her IS wrapped around her. Dark grey armor, pauldrons in the shape of dogs’ heads breathing fire. The blade Escort Black clenched in her hand. Glowing red-hot with her passion, a challenge to her oncoming foe. “Bring it!”

As Rain roared her battle cry, the Tempesta closed in. Metal clashed on metal, sparks flew.

“Oh? You certainly seem perky today. Ahh, the passion of youth.”

“Save it for the nurse, old lady!” The hounds on her shoulders breathed their flame.

Somehow, Allie caught it in her palms before saying, “That’s a rude thing to say to a lady in her twenties. Sounds like you need a spanking!”

The Tempesta moved like a tempest, blowing back the flame, casting Rain’s bullets to the ground. As they fell on the parking lot below, explosions rang out.

“Mmm, doesn’t look like anyone was hurt.” After a quick check with her biosensor, Allie fixed her gaze on Rain. Her right eye, too, was replaced by her IS. With a whirr, the lens focused.

[HEAT SOURCE DETECTED. TARGETING ACCURACY: THREE CENTIMETERS.]

“Got you from the left!” Allie’s prosthetic right hand formed a javelin of wind, and she hurled it at Rain.

“Tch!” There was no avoiding that. Rain gritted her teeth in anticipation. But— Forte Sapphire blocked the javelin with a shield of crystalline ice.

“Forte...”

“I can’t...”

“What?”

“I can’t just sit back and watch! Why are you just letting her attack you?! We’re the unbreakable shield Aegis, aren’t we?! And who’ll braid my hair without you?! Who?!” Forte screamed. Screamed out her true feelings. And turned traitor against IS Academy and her

homeland. “Bwahhh...”

“Some days I don’t get you. What’re you crying for?”

“You... You made me cry...”

As their eyes met, more javelins closed in.

“Save the touching moments for later!”

Not one, this time, but three. But rather than evading, this time, Rain and Forte took them head-on.

“Ohh?”

Heat and cold together created a phase transition, a wall of energy—Aegis. Hellhound’s flame, Cold Blood’s chill. Their meeting wasn’t chance. It was destiny.

“Looks like it’s two on one now. Unless you’re expecting your precious little Ichika to back you up?”

Rain knew Autumn had been assigned to keep him busy. There was no chance that he’d be in this fight.

“Mhm. Why don’t you give it a good thinking over? About why I’m here?”

Allie spread her arms, as if finally bringing the full force of Tempesta to bear. As she did, mirror images formed around her. Allie, and two clones. This was the true form of her one-off ability—Early Tempest.

“Looks more like three on two to me.”

The odds weren’t in their favor. But Rain and Forte weren’t giving up yet.

“We can do it.”

They could. With the force of a love like no other, they knew they could overcome any foe.

“Sorry, kids, but life comes at you fast.” Allie’s clones may have been following her movements, but their attacks were just as fierce as the real thing, thundering like a tempest around their desperate defense.

“Tch! Not bad for an old lady!”

“That’s a pretty harsh way to describe a twenty-eight-year-old!”

“Twenty-eight’s about ten too many, auntie!”

“I’m gonna wash your mouths out with soap, you little brats!”

They may have sounded like squabbling children, but this was a serious battle. Early Tempest was one of the strongest one-off abilities in the world, and its raging winds tore at their armor even with glancing blows. And even worse for Rain and Forte, Hellhound and Cold Blood were still equipped with IS Academy’s shield energy limiters. They could see that a drawn-out fight was only going to get worse and worse for them.

“Forte! Let’s do *it*!” Rain shouted.

“*It*?! But that’s...”

“It’s what?”

“It’s embarrassing...”

“This is no time to worry about that!”

A blush rose to Forte’s face, and Rain’s expression steeled as she fended off Allie’s attacks.

“Let’s do it!”

“Are we really going to? Right here?” Forte, finally finding her determination, drew Allie’s attention with a shower of ice.

“Kids these days, can’t go five minutes without thinking about *doing it*.” As Allie swooped in for another attack, Rain again wrapped her arms around Forte and kissed her passionately.

“Here goes! Ice In Fire!” Rain and Forte’s bodies were encrusted in armor formed of flame wrapped in ice.

“My wind can carve right through that!” Fists wrapped in raging gales struck forth, with impact stronger than an anti-tank rifle. But—

“Tricked you, you old creep!” As the ice shattered, the flame within exploded outward like reactive armor. Propelled by the explosion, Rain and Forte managed to break away from Allie. And they knew what to do next.

“Let’s get out of here!”

“Got it!”

In the blink of an eye, they were gone.

“Oh dear. Whatever will this sunburn do to my complexion?” Allie bemusedly brushed away the falling embers. “I wonder how he’s doing, though? I should check up on him.”

As Allie’s IS faded out, she nonchalantly popped open a parasol and strode off.



“You’re—” Ichika had no idea what was going on, but he recognized the woman in front of him.

“Just as slow on your feet as ever, Orimura Ichika!” Swiftly, Autumn drew a pistol.

Before Ichika could even realize he was in trouble, the training Laura had given him kicked in. Fleeing from the gunfire, he raced through the side streets of Kyoto, thinking only of how he could avoid drawing bystanders into the fight. *Dammit! I need to get away from any people!*

“Dead end, kid.”

Ichika gulped nervously. He’d taken the wrong back alley and had nowhere left to run. Just as he thought it was all over, though, Blue Tears’ bits formed a circle around Autumn.

“Cecilia!”

“Fancy meeting you here, Ichika.” Autumn was confused by

Cecilia's sunny disposition—but only for a moment.

“Don't move!” As she turned her head toward the voice, she saw Houki, Ling, Charlotte, Laura, and Kanzashi—all the first years with their own IS. And all with their IS out and ready to go. It was enough to make the blood drain even from Autumn's face.

“Autumn, isn't it? Why don't you come with us?”

“I should warn you, my impact cannon is already locked on.”

“No quick moves.”

“At least, if you want to live.”

“Prisoner captured.”

Autumn's pistol thudded to the ground, as if to say the words ‘I surrender’ for her.



“Ahh, this feels so nice.” Rain swam nude in the pool of a luxury hotel's penthouse suite. “Just like I expected from Aunt Squall and her cell Monochrome Avatar. You really know how to treat a lady.”

Squall, lounging beside the pool, gave a wry smile and said, “Was that some sarcasm? Oh, and don't call me ‘aunt.’ She'll realize who I am.”

“That's fine. Right, Forte?”

Forte, floating in nothing but a gigantic swim ring, replied with a nervous start, “Y-Yeah, hahaha...”

Embarrassment was visible on her face. It was only natural—Rain and Forte may have been naked, but Squall was in a swimsuit.

“I wonder what's taking Autumn so long. I'd asked her to bring us Ichika,” Squall sighed as she took her sunglasses off.

“Ah, Autumn's been captured.”

“Mm? I'm not quite sure what you mean,” Squall grimaced at Rain. *Ex-* or not, Autumn was still special forces, and she was equipped with an IS to boot. She wouldn't go down without a fight.

“I'm sure of it. They've been texting each other all afternoon about how the first years surrounded her and took her in.”

Realizing the situation they were in, Squall stood up from her pool chair.

“Hold on, Autumn. I'm coming.”

Anger blazed in her eyes. There weren't many hasty decisions Squall would make, but saving her lover was one of them.

“They've kinda got a lot of firepower for that. Even Alicia's there.”

Rain was right. Even with three IS at full power, the odds would be against them. Squall ground her teeth in frustration.

“We've just gotta wait for our chance. Right, Aunt Squall?”

“.....” Squall took Rain's teasing as an invitation to silently stalk out.

“And there she goes.” Half-amused and half-resigned, Rain backstroked over to Forte. “That’s probably enough time at the pool for us too, Forte. How about bed instead?”

“Okay...” Forte blushed red at the implication. But her doubts were gone. She was convinced. There was no turning back. She’d be by Rain’s side, tearing down destiny together. Yes, there was no turning back...

Chapter III: Letters From the Inferno!

The Ancient Capital Burns

“Who’s this lady supposed to be?!” Ling was the first to speak up as they met up in a suite at a traditional ryokan, and her shout was enough to shake the sliding partitions.

“Eh? Huh?” Ichika’s jaw hung open in surprise. “Autumn, right?”

Ichika pointed at the bound woman as he answered.

“That’s Ms. Autumn to you, punk!” Autumn was as angry as a caged animal.

“Quiet down.” As she spoke, Laura’s fingertips dug into Autumn’s solar plexus, and she gasped for air.

“No, I’m talking about *her*! The one who’s been all over you—Ahh! Wh-What are you doing?!”

As Houki turned the topic to Allie, she grinned mischievously and said, “But he smells so nice! See, Shiny likes him too!” The white cat purred contentedly, something which no one really noticed compared to Allie’s constant body contact with Ichika.

“Stop showing off,” Chifuyu muttered exhaustedly.

“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it, Brynhildr. I see your little brother’s still as dear to you as ever.” She sprightly sprung away from Ichika, who, disappointingly to the others, was visibly disappointed with this.

“Seriously! You could at least pretend to mind!”

“But she smells nice...”

“Grrr!” Ling stomped her feet while punching Ichika’s arm.

“Ahh, I see. You know, Ichika, I prefer only the finest fragrances...” Cecilia stroked her Starlight Mk. III as she spoke, visibly itching for an excuse to pull the trigger.

“Ichika, you just can’t say hello to a lady without her following you home, can you? I wonder why?” Charlotte smiled like an angel, but her eyes were deadly serious.

“Get a hold of yourselves! We need to worry about Daryl and Forte now, too!” It was up to Chifuyu to focus the thoughts of a room full of lovestruck teen girls.

“Why don’t I start by introducing myself?” Allie suggested.

“...Whatever.” Chifuyu rubbed her forehead.

“My name is Alicia. I’m sure you’ve all heard of Allie and her Tempesta?”

Of course they knew about the second Mondo Grosso champion.

Hers was a household name, especially for the Europeans.

“So you’re the Tempesta’s pilot... My apologies for being rude, but what... happened to you?” Cecilia asked nervously, but Allie answered with no offense taken.

“Things went wrong during the testing of the Tempesta II, and, well, they’re gone now.” Sensing that follow-up questions weren’t welcome, the girls fell silent. A heavy silence which hung over the room.

“Hey! So when are you gonna untie me?” This time, it was Chifuyu’s turn to deal with Autumn not being able to take a hint.

“Guh!”

Woman prisoner or no, Chifuyu showed no mercy. She was a firm believer in not discriminating based on age or gender (and let’s not examine the obvious implications involving children and the elderly).

“So. We’re down two. They’re down one. But with Allie, we’re up one. Unfortunately, they’re up two now too.” Chifuyu’s steady voice was enough to get everyone back on track... Except for Allie, who languidly floated in her IS, puffing on her pipe.

“We’ve survived their first move, but that’s not enough. We need to strike back.” Tatenashi appeared from seemingly nowhere. “There are two places they could be holed up. One is a hotel nearby. The other is a warehouse at the airport. They’re living up to the ‘phantom’ part of their name, for sure. The hotels are all booked like normal tourists, and the hardware’s kept as air freight... Clever.”

As the rest nodded in sudden understanding, Autumn interjected, “It took this long for you morons to figure that out?”

“Quiet down.” This time, both Laura and Chifuyu jabbed at Autumn’s torso.

“*Cough, cough!*” She glared at them as blood seeped from her mouth. But the glares they shot back left her trembling.

“Let’s split up, then. Allie will lead the raid on the hotel. Houki and Ling, join in the attack. Cecilia, provide cover.”

“Roger.”

“Leave it to me.”

“A perfect choice.”

Each nodded. No one was silly enough to insist on going with Ichika even now.

“The others—Ichika, Charlotte, Laura, Kanzashi—will infiltrate the warehouse. Laura, you take point.”

“Of course. I’ve got this.”

“Let’s do our best.”

“I hope I don’t get in the way...”

“All right, let’s do it!”

Everyone here was visibly nervous, too, but still up to the

challenge.

“Ms. Orimura, Ms. Yamada, and I will wait in reserve. If anything happens, we’ll be right there.” Tatenashi gave the teams a confident, encouraging wink, made all the more believable by her position as IS Academy’s strongest. “Get going, then!”

She snapped open a fan reading ‘move out!’ The die was cast.



“Phew.” After a refreshing shower, Rain called out to Squall, “You don’t have to get so worked up. We’ll have Autumn out of there in no time.”

“...Watch your mouth, Rain.”

“Ooh, scary! Doesn’t she just make you shiver, Forte?”

Forte, who had shared the shower, was surprised by the sudden attention, muttered, “Y-Yeah...”

“Now that the limiters are off our IS, let’s go over loadouts.”

“Got it!”

The penthouse suite was scattered with weaponry that had already been brought up from the warehouse.

“Oh, hey, I recognize that one! It’s the Jack Denim .38-caliber SMG. Looks like we’ve got the top of the line here.”

“Nah, that’s totally last season’s. See? The sheathing’s different.”

“I see, I see. Still gonna take it, though.”

“Really? Guess I’ll go with this one, then.” Forte reached for the .42-caliber Alt Assault rifle. It may have been small, but it packed a punch—the magazine held 100 rounds of anti-IS ammunition.

The two opened up their IS and each began to install the new gear.

“...Okay, good to go.”

“I’m ready too.”

Rain and Forte nodded at each other.

“Then let’s get this party started!” Rain let off a burst of fire at the wall of windows behind Squall.

“.....?!” For a moment, Forte was shocked, wondering if Rain was really a double agent—but no.

“Good job noticing me. But I’m here for Squall!” Her resounding voice, her proud tone, her gleaming eyes. Allie was back for more.

“Come, Golden Dawn!” Squall barked as she opened her IS, flames wrapping around its long tail claw. New, now, were two gigantic rings which wrapped around it protectively. “Well, well. Let’s see how this new Red Burn package works!”

Bursts of lasers erupted from the rings in all directions, scorching everything, and not only the floor of the suite.

“What’s the rush? It’s too cramped in here, let’s take it outside!”

“No thanks. I have a date with Autumn.”

“You’re not getting away from me!”

The two IS flew through the blazing suite, and crashed through the far wall, joining the battle in the night sky over Kyoto.

As Rain watched them depart, she leapt from the hotel in her IS Hellhound. Waiting outside for her were Houki’s Akatsubaki and Ling’s Shenlong, with Cecilia’s Blue Tears as backup. A moment later, Forte’s Cold Blood followed her.

“It might be three on two, but no way are we gonna lose to you rookies!” Rain was fired up and ready to go, but Forte, still feeling a little guilty, wasn’t in the mood for enthusiastic posing. Instead, she simply showed her determination to protect Rain by stepping in front of her with her shield raised.

“I want to know one thing before we fight!” Houki called out.

“Why did you betray us, Forte Sapphire?!”

They’d learned that Rain was with Phantom Task the whole time. That she had been a spy planted to steal IS even back when she was just an American cadet. But what they didn’t know was why Forte had turned against them too.

“If you haven’t figured that out, you’ll never beat us, Shinonono Houki,” Forte was quiet but clear.

“Good enough, then. We’ll just have to show you how we deal with traitors!” Ling was the first to make her move, with a scattered spray of impact cannon blasts to buy some distance. And then—

“My sniping is simply marvelous!” Blasts from Cecilia’s Starlight Mk. III tore through the sky, only to be blocked by Forte and Rain’s Aegis.

“You’re gonna need a lot more than that to take us on! Isn’t that right, Forte?”

“Sure is!” Side-by-side, they leveled their guns at Houki’s squad and opened fire.

“Damn you!” With no one to tank the shots, they had to split for cover and rejoin formation after, but since they were unused to operating as a squad of three, this left plenty of openings.

“Got you!” The hound’s heads on Rain’s shoulders belched flame at Houki. Slowly, the chains tightened around them.

“Your turn, Forte!”

“Got ‘em!”

With Houki, Ling, and Cecilia backed into a tight clump, a massive block of ice formed over them and began to fall.

“Uggghh!!” Houki shoved Ling and Cecilia out of the way before catching the ice on her crossed blades. But it was too heavy to bear and too solid to cut through, and she plummeted toward the city below.

“Houki!”

They wavered between helping her or carrying on the fight as they regained their balance, and that moment of hesitation was enough for Forte and Rain to make their move.

“Got you!”

A cluster of explosions swallowed Ling and Cecilia as they plunged toward the earth.

“You plebes aren’t getting away!” Rain’s attacks didn’t let up for a moment.



Meanwhile, at the airport—

“Are there really any clues about Phantom Task here?” Ichika, Laura, Charlotte, and Kanzashi rushed through the shadows. After the fight that afternoon, their cover in Kyoto was blown. All they could do was hurry.

“Wait!” Laura, in point, stopped in her tracks. “Something isn’t right. It’s too quiet.”

She was right. Never mind an IS, there weren’t even security guards around. Sensing danger, she opened her IS Schwarzer Regen.

“Ichika!” As a blinding light suddenly flashed, she dove to cover Ichika.

“Ugh!”

“Laura! Kanzashi, Charl, let’s—” Before he could even finish his sentence, the hangar blew apart. Even with their shields up and functioning, the blast knocked them off balance as an IS came flying directly at them.

“...Silent Zephyrus!”

Madoka was here.

“Weak...” Sweeping Kanzashi and Charl out of the way with her bayonet, she closed in on Ichika with an Ignition Boost. “You’re the one I’m after, Orimura Ichika!”

Ichika was sent tumbling by Madoka’s diving tackle, but picked himself up off the ground just as quickly as she did and fired off his own Ignition Boost.

“Looks like you’ve gotten better at this.”

“I’ve been getting plenty of practice lately!”

They streaked through the night sky like twin comets, blade against blade, every slash matched with a parry and riposte.

Laura, Charlotte, and Kanzashi had taken more damage than they’d expected from Madoka’s sudden attack, and it was already too late to catch up. But, worried about Ichika, they tried their hardest.

Before they could reach him, though, a shadow flitted into their path.

“Hewwo! It looks like you’re trying to spoil Kurokishi’s big day, and that’s a no-no!” The lilting voice belonged to none other than Shinonono Tabane. “Sparkle sparkle POP!”

She spun a magical wand to and fro in her left hand as she turned to face Laura and Kanzashi. Immediately, the three girls’ IS slammed to the ground.

“Wha—”

“I can’t move...”

“Is this... gravity?”

No matter how hard they struggled to stand up, it felt like a gigantic hand was pressing them down.

“Tee-hee. What do you think of my newest little project, Experimental Area Denial Weapon #08? Or as I like to call it, King’s Field. I turned the power up nice and high for you!” Tabane, grinning, stretched out a hand toward them. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll be taking your IS cores.”

Laura may have been ground into the dirt, but her spirit still wasn’t broken, and her face twisted in rage as Tabane approached.

“Dammit! I won’t forget this!”

“Ahahaha, being angry won’t get you anywhere. Life’s unfair, and it doesn’t always have to make sense.”

Suddenly, Tabane yanked back the hand she’d stretched out toward Laura. Looking closely, Laura could notice a cut beginning to well blood.

“Oh, there you are, Chichan!”

Chifuyu plunged in from the night sky, wielding a katana of the utmost craftsmanship. It cut, with absolute precision, between Laura and Tabane.

“You’re such a softie, Chichan.” Tabane nimbly shifted, and the blade passed a hair’s-breadth from her. Their duel was as choreographed as a waltz.

“I couldn’t just stand back and watch you hurt my students.”

It was a closely-matched battle, but, slowly but surely, Chifuyu began to end up on the back foot as she tried to defend Laura and the others. Still, though, she didn’t let the pressure bait her into overextending. Precise step by precise step, she put up an impenetrable defense.

“Let’s dance, Chichan!”

“I’d rather not, Tabane.”

Tabane deftly parried each of Chifuyu’s katana slashes with her wand. Whatever it was made of, it held up, as sparks flew each time their weapons ground together.



“I... I get to watch the strongest in the world, the Brynhildr, and the ultimate human, the Renürion, fight...” Laura was emotionally bowled over. Not just as a soldier, but as a human, as a living being, the primal forces clashing before her fascinated her. “They’re... almost too strong...”

No. She could sense something *beyond* strength from both of them.

“Yaaaawn.” Tabane suddenly tossed her wand on the ground. At the same time, Chifuyu stopped mid-slash.

“This is a waste. If we’re going to have a big flashy showdown, we need to pick a better place to do it.”

“And you expect me to just go ‘oh, right, good idea’ and let you go?”

“Mm? Yeah, kinda. Maybe not be happy about it, but don’t you have your kids to worry about?” Tabane clenched her hand into the shape of a gun, and leveled her index finger at Laura. “Bang!”

Laura, Kanzashi, and Charl were blown away, IS and all, by a sudden tremendous impact.

“Dammit, Tabane!”

“See you later, Chichan! I hope you’re ready when we meet again!” Tabane winked, snapped her fingers, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

“.....”

Chifuyu turned away from where Tabane had disappeared, her thoughts likewise turning to Ichika’s battle in the faraway sky.



“Dammit!” Ichika tried to catch Madoka between Ignition Boosts, but their difference in skill was enough for her to turn the tables.

“Time to finish this,” as Madoka spoke, her bits formed a circle around her, holding Ichika back. “Let me show you my new power!”

The color of Silent Zephyrus shifted in answer. As it faded from a butterfly-like purple to a jet black, Ichika’s stomach plunged in his gut.

“Second Shift?!”

Watching the Silent Zephyrus transform, he remembered his fight with the Silverio Gospel. Ichika began to tremble as he imagined an even more difficult Madoka.

“Bwahahaha! I can feel the power flow through me! It’s mine! Ahaha! Ahahahahaha!”

Kurokishi’s armor, studded with ominous spikes, seemed to exude bloodthirsty menace. Not just Kurokishi—its pair of lancer bits had grown in size and power, and the armor of its long rifle had folded, shifted, to transform into a buster sword. The blade crackled with dark purple lightning as Madoka took a few experimental swipes at

Ichika.

“Ugh!” He tried to parry with his Yukihiro Nigata, but the sheer force of the energy field pushed it away. “Gah...!”

Ichika stumbled, but rather than follow up, Madoka instead leered at him.

“I, Orimura Madoka, will celebrate the Kurokishi’s first mission by killing you!” Her lancer bits shot forward at Ichika, not just thrusting but drilling with the same dark energy.

“You won’t get me that easily!” Ichika deployed the energy-absorbing shield from his Setsura weapons module. But the repeated attacks were more than he could block with a shield on his left arm. And as his energy began to drop, he exposed a fatal weakness.

“I’ve got you now, Orimura Ichika!” Ichika dodged out of the way of the lancer bits, only to catch a sweeping overhand blow from the buster sword.

“Dammit!” He tried to parry with Yukihiro Nigata, but Madoka’s blade cleaved straight through it.

“Hahahaha!” Ichika’s IS plunged through the night sky, the lancer bits scorching the surface below as they fired down at him in pursuit. The flames of the burning forest below danced in Madoka’s eyes as they twisted cruelly, and as he plunged to earth, she drifted down, grinding him into the ash with one foot.

“Ngh!” Combined with the sudden impact, even the last-ditch life support shielding of his IS had been broken, and the pain wracked through Ichika.

With a gleeful smile on her face, Madoka kicked him over and over, the point of her boots denting his armor, piercing his shields, digging into his flesh.

“Ugh...” Ichika felt his consciousness began to slip away.

“Is that all you had? Looks like your head is mine.” Murmuring softly, with murderous glee, Madoka increased the energy to the cutting blade of her buster sword. “I can finally be Orimura Madoka. Finally, *finally*!”

She swung her blade down to lop off Ichika’s head, but somehow, it stopped just before cutting into his neck. Somehow, somehow, even though he was unconscious, his left hand reached up of its own accord and wrapped around the buster sword.

“What?!” Madoka had been forcing Ichika back with her superior power, but now, the tables were turned. Ichika was unconscious, but his left hand gripped the blade of her sword.

“How are you—” Madoka tried to gain some distance, but before she could, Ichika stood. No, not stand, more like dragged to his feet by some unseen force.

“.....” He hung in the air for a moment, and then, his eyes

snapped open, shining with a golden light.

“What *are* you?!” No answer left Ichika’s mouth. No conscious thought. Only pure, automatic resistance.

Then, raggedly, his dented and gouged armor began to slough off. Ichika, no, Byakushiki was shedding its armor like a snake would shed its skin. And beneath was—

“Shirokishi?! Impossible! Your data was supposed to be completely —”



Before Madoka could even finish her sentence, Shirokishi sprang into action. A kick as fast, no, even faster than an Ignition Boost sent Madoka's back slamming into the tree behind her.

"You're—" A flash of light blinked by Madoka's face, shortly followed by an energy explosion. "Did he lose control of his IS?! Or no, wait, is it echoes of Chifuyu—"

Madoka's bewilderment was interrupted by Ichika, no, the IS Shirokishi continuing its attacks. On paper, the Kurokishi still should have had the advantage, but something deep, deep within Shirokishi was giving it power.

"Dammit! I won't give up! Not ever!" Madoka wouldn't back down. That was the destiny of those named Orimura. Their *raison d'être*. And they'd let absolutely no one take it away from them. "Feel the might of Kurokishi!"

Once again, two forms clashed before the raging flames.



"Oh where, oh where could you plebes be hiding?"

Bystanders scrambled for cover as a sudden IS battle broke out among the world-famous sightseeing spots of Kyoto's old city. It just went to show how ineffective evacuation plans, public and private alike, could be.

"We've got you now, Daryl Casey! No, Rain Meusel!" Ling leapt out from between two buildings, her impact cannons already firing. But they still couldn't pierce the Aegis.

"What kind of half-assed plan is that?!"

"Ugh! Cecilia, cover me!" As Rain went on the attack, Ling switched to the defensive.

Meanwhile, Cecilia's bits aimed for the gaps opening in the Aegis.

"We can—"

"Not happening!" Forte's wall of ice may not have been as strong as the Aegis barrier itself, but they were still quite the threat. Each time a beam pierced through one, it shattered into icicles which came flying back.

"Ling! Let's fall back!"

"No! We can't leave Houki behind!"

Houki still hadn't recovered from the damage she'd taken, and they needed to protect her. That bond gave them strength—and also, now, a weakness.

"Let's finish this!" An orb of flame swelled from Rain's right hand. Just like in Squall's fight with Tatenashi.

"Rain. Forte. Get over to the fight with Ichika. You've gotta see this," Squall suddenly broadcast on an open channel.

Ling and the others heard it too.

“What did you do to Ichika?!”

“Excuuuuse me. I didn’t do anything at all. It’s all him.”

“What?!”

“Oh my, it’s getting pretty stormy over here. I’m going to have to hang up. Ta-ta!” Squall cut the connection.

“Hey, wait! ...Ugh, dammit!” Ling’s angry shouts fell upon deaf ears.

“So, what are you plebes gonna do?”

“We’re going, of course! You’d better not get in our way!”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. See you later, I guess.” Rain shot the ball of flame up like a firework, blinding the first years. When their vision returned, she and Forte were gone.

“What the hell was that?!” Houki had finally recovered, and caught up with Ling as she raged impotently.

“Houki, are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine. We need to catch up with Ichika.”

“Understood! Flank speed ahead!” Ling nodded, and the three sped off.



Meanwhile, in battle with the Kurokishi—

Madoka’s Kurokishi had held the advantage at first, but unleashed from human restraint, the Shirokishi fought it blow for blow.

“Ahahahaha! This is just like fighting an AI! You’re nothing more than her ghost!”

The Kurokishi raised its buster sword Fenrir Blow to full power as it transformed into a sword-whip. At the same time, its lancer bits closed in, encircling Shirokishi.

“I’ll chop you to pieces!”

The energy blades of Fenrir Blow began to saw at Shirokishi’s armor. But just as even its emergency life support energy was about to run out, Shirokishi caught the blade in its hands.

“What?!” Madoka couldn’t hide her shock as Shirokishi began to speak.

[You have no right to such power.]

Shirokishi’s words pierced Madoka’s heart.

[You are a failure. Why? Because you were made too strong.]

Words someone had left behind in its memory.

“Shut up... Shut up, shut up! I’m... I’m an Orimura! The perfect Orimura Madoka!”

Madoka leapt for Shirokishi’s head, trying to twist it off. But Shirokishi—or Ichika, or both—caught her by her neck. Before she could even retaliate, it pressed her into the ground and slammed into her with a full-force Ignition Boost.

“Ugh!”

She coughed up blood as her back was ground into the earth. Still, the Shirokishi kept going.

[Those with no right to power need no power.]

The words came from Ichika’s mouth, but mechanically. Again, she felt them stab into her heart.

[Still a D aptitude. Chifuyu was an A at the same age.]

[Even the procedure to artificially raise your aptitude was a failure. And why?]

[It’s because you’re unloved. No one loves you. Not a single person. All you have is bottomless hatred. You have no future. No hope. Only despair. So...]

No, that was why!

“I *am* strong!”

Madoka slipped from Shirokishi’s grasp, and slammed her knees into the armor covering its torso, mindlessly kicking over and over like a child who knew no other way to fight back.

Whether Madoka’s half-prayer, half-curse had been heard, or whether it simply felt its armor beginning to give way, Shirokishi released her.

“Dieeeeeeeeeeeee!”

Madoka switched her lancer bits into one-hand melee mode, and plunged them toward Shirokishi’s forehead. But her hope was in vain.

Shirokishi lopped off the tips of the bits, before plunging its blade down toward her.

“Ah...!”

As her breastplate was cleaved open, a locket fell out. Inside was a single picture of Orimura Chifuyu. *My... My only connection!* She couldn’t let it go. She couldn’t lose it. Without it, she was nothing. “.....!” Somehow, she managed to snatch it out of the air. But at the same time, she left an opening for Shirokishi to attack again.



“It’s about time, M.”

Squall, in her IS Golden Dawn, plunged down from her vantage point in the heavens above. Shirokishi noticed her entrance almost immediately, but a wall of flames blocked it from closing in.

“Impressive. I think I’m becoming a fan of this package.” Her right arm was wrapped around her lover Autumn. It seems like she’d been able to get away from Allie. “Goodbye for now, Orimura Ichika. I can’t wait to see you again.”

“Let me go, Squall! I— I need to—”

“Children are far more pleasant when they do as they’re told. You don’t want to be punished, do you?” Latching an arm around Madoka, Squall was gone into the far-off skies with an Ignition Boost and her new package’s thrusters.

And all that remained was only Shirokishi in Ichika’s body.

[Here they come...] He, or it, spoke to anyone, or no one. And as if summoned by the words, Houki, Ling, and Cecilia appeared.

“What’s going on? What happened to Byakushiki? What happened to Ichika?!” Ling half-shouted and half-screamed.

[Those with a right to such power...] Shirokishi leveled its blade at Houki. *[Battle me...]*

A harrowing clash was about to unfold.

Chapter IV: Girls On High! Spread Your Wings

“Ms. Yamada! Wake up! Ms. Yamada!” Tatenashi had been caring for Ms. Yamada at the ryokan following her collapse.

“Ugh, where am I? I remember, Squall Meusel was there, and then...”

“You shouldn’t try fighting an IS on foot. You’re not Ms. Orimura.” Seeing the alarm on Maya’s face, Tatenashi tried to calm her.

“Anyway, I met with our contact, and took delivery.” Tatenashi passed a brooch to Maya. “Show me why they used to call you ‘Killing Shield.’”

“Ahahahah, can’t you just forget about that?” Maya adjusted her glasses, and then spoke with a serious face. “Anyway, let’s hurry.”

“To the battlefield?”

“Yes.”

Tatenashi nodded while wrapping an arm around Maya, and opened her IS Mysterious Lady.

“Let’s go!”

They flew to Shirokishi.



“Wake up, Ichika!” Ling and the others were trying their hardest to get through to Ichika as they dodged Shirokishi’s attacks. But there were no signs of his awakening, only fiercer and fiercer attacks.

“What do we do? Our shield energy won’t hold out much longer!”

“I was rather hoping your Kenran Butou would help with that!”

“But...!” She’d never been able to use it for anyone but Ichika’s sake, and in this situation... Still, not wanting to admit that, she took point. “But! I won’t let you just grind us down! If you won’t wake up, we’ll beat some sense into you!”

Houki sprang to the attack, her Karaware clashing against Shirokishi’s Yukihiro Nigata.

“Now I understand why Forte betrayed us!”

For the sake of the one she loved, she’d give up anything. Make any sacrifice. Even risk her life.

“I don’t care what it takes! I’ll save you, Ichika!” Shouting, she slapped Shirokishi’s blade away, but it raised its left arm and let loose a particle burst. The blast of energy scorched across Houki’s torso.

“Gah!” As Houki stumbled, it followed up its attack, only to be repelled by a precise shot from Blue Tears.

“If it’s for Ichika’s sake, I’m in too!”

“Same here. I won’t give up either!”

With Cecilia and Ling on the front lines too, the battle heated up. But the memories of a Brynhildr contained within Shirokishi were more than enough to handle a three-on-one fight.

“I will not lose! My feelings for Ichika mean more than that!”

Cecilia thought back to the first time they’d met.

Maybe she’d fallen for him then? But there was no way she could have admitted it to herself that soon. It was only fighting alongside him, knowing each other’s weaknesses, that she first discovered love.

“You’re ten thousand years too soon to take Ichika away from me!” Cecilia yelled as her bits focused their fire. At the same time, Ling opened up with her impact cannon.

“Hey, quit trying to take Ichika for yourself!”

Ling’s feelings were just as strong. She remembered back to elementary school, when Japan was a strange and foreign place, and she had to act tough to hide her fear. Ichika was the only one who understood why she acted like she did. Whenever it was too much for her, whenever she felt alone, he was by her side. And somewhere, deep inside, Ichika was fighting alone against whatever had overcome him. She had to reach out to him. Just like he did for her. This time, it was Ling’s turn. The flames of her first love, still smoldering in her heart, demanded nothing less.

“I won’t let some half-forgotten memory of Chifuyu’s have my Ichika!” Ling slammed Souten Gagetsu together and flung it at Shirokishi, which wavered as it took the blow. As it did, a burst of shotgun fire followed up.

“Charlotte!”

Charlotte had recovered from her beating at Tabane’s hands, and she, Laura, and Kanzashi immediately joined the fight.

“Hey, I was listening in on the open channel, so I think I know what’s going on. We’re all here to tell Ichika how we really feel, right?”

“It’s my turn, then!”

“I won’t get left out this time!”

Their hearts beating wildly, the three joined the fight.

“Me first!” Charlotte flew out ahead of the group. “Wake up, Ichika!”

Purging her shield, she brought forth her Grey Scale Pile Bunker. The others almost shouted out ‘Wait, isn’t that going too far?’

“This’ll do it!”

From the moment they’d met, Ichika had set her free. He’d told

her she always had a place alongside him. And that was the place in life she wanted. She knew what her heart longed for. And now, she wanted to say it. Wanted him to hear.

“Turn back into the Ichika I love!” Her pile bunker pierced the armor on his left arm. With the Setsura weapons pack knocked out of action, Laura followed up, stabbing with her plasma daggers.

“You promised me you’d protect me, Ichika!”

Her love for Ichika, growing from their star-crossed first encounter, was as strong as her pride. He’d promised to protect her. And now, she was going to protect him. She wanted to be at his side forever.

“Ichika, can you hear me?!”

“It’s ‘us,’ Laura!” A salvo from the Yama-arashi missile pods closed in on Shirokishi. Just as they were about to detonate, Charlotte, Laura, Houki and the others all opened fire. “Give me back my Ichika!”

Kanzashi had always lived in Tatenashi’s shadow. It was only Ichika who brought her out into the light. Yes, to her, he *was* light. Sometimes dazzling, sometimes warming, always direct. And she wanted to be bathed in that light. Never to lose it again. So that she could be herself.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!” The group was shocked by Ms. Yamada’s sudden arrival in Tatenashi’s arms.

“What are you doing here, Ms. Yamada?!”

“Stand up! Hurry! It’s showtime!” Her body was enveloped by the glow of an opening IS—one none of them had ever seen.

“Is this your IS, Ms. Yamada?”

“It sure is. I call it the Rafale Revive Special, ‘The Show Must Go On!’”

Gasps arose.

“Now show them what you could do as a cadet!”

“I’d really rather that this never came up again, but...” Reticence or no, four gigantic shield wings swept back from Ms. Yamada. “Here goes! Shattered Sky!”

Like a hawk spreading its wings, the bottom faces of the shields swiveled forward, then shot out from her IS under wired control.

“I don’t want to hurt any of my students, but—”

To get Ichika back, she’d have to take up arms against Shirokishi. That much was clear. Maya’s shots tore at Shirokishi with unrivaled precision. And the moment it slowed, her four shields pinned it down. “This’ll do it!”

While her shields held Shirokishi in place, Maya leveled a submachine gun in each hand, and squeezed the triggers.

Rat-a-tat-a-tat! The roar of her guns echoed across the battlefield. Bullets ricocheting inside its shields, Shirokishi’s armor was torn to

shreds by the hail of fire.

“Whoa!”

“Ms. Yamada, that’s overkill...”

With its shields spent and its armor torn away from the inside, the Shirokishi fell to earth.

“Ah—!”

No, not the Shirokishi anymore. Its armor, its form, were back to that of Byakushiki.

“**ICHIKA!**” the girls shouted out as he was plucked from the air just before crashing down.

“Phew...” No one was quite sure who gasped in relief. Ichika’s loss of control, and the girls’ confessions, were over.



“Where am I?”

When I opened my eyes, I was under a blanket in a Japanese-style room. I couldn’t remember what happened. I didn’t know why I was there.

“.....!” As I tried to get up, my body ached. Looking down at myself, I saw that I was wrapped in bandages. “Oww... What’s going on?”

“You’re finally awake.”

“Huh?”

Allie was sitting on a sofa nearby.

“Um...”

“I guess this is goodbye.”

“Huh?”

She set down her cat Shiny and stood up, then began speaking, “I, Alicia Giosestaf, resign my Italian commission to join Phantom Task.”

It was so shocking a statement that I didn’t understand what was going on. As I was about to ask why, Shiny walked up to me and licked my face.

“Owww, that hurts! I’m cut there! C’mon, stop— Owwwww!”

“Take good care of Shiny, Ichika.”

“Wait, but why?!”

“Why?” That was all I could wonder. I didn’t understand what was happening or why it was happening. All I could do was accept it.

“The reason’s simple. I want my match with Orimura Chifuyu. And if joining Phantom Task is what it takes... So be it.” Having said her piece, Allie leapt from the window. “I hope you get stronger before we meet again!”

She’d entered my life like a storm, and left it like one too. All I could do was stroke Shiny and wonder.



"I'm really sorry!"

Ichika was bowing on the floor of a meeting room at the ryokan, begging for forgiveness. Before him, the girls stood, their arms crossed.

"Even back to normal, you don't remember?"

"Yes, ma'am..."

"All that, and you don't remember anything?"

"Yes, ma'am..."

"Ichika, are you an idiot?!"

"Yes, ma'am..."

"Do you really think this is something you can just paper over with an apology?"

"Yes, ma'am..."

"Are you even listening to us?!"

"Yes, ma'am..."

"Ichika, are you feeling okay?"

"Yes, ma'am..."

"Ichika, can you say anything other than 'yes, ma'am'?"

"Yes, ma'am..."

Angry glares all around.

"Calm down, everyone. It's over and Ichika's okay, so we should be smiling, right?"

"You're too easy on him, Ms. Yamada!"

"Indeed!"

"He needs to be punished!"

"Agreed! He needs to learn his lesson!"

"That was no way for my bride to behave."

"Maybe he can make it up with a massage."

"That'll work. He can be massaging until he can't even turn a doorknob." Tatenashi grinned, and snapped open a fan reading 'service.'

"Ahaha..." He could imagine his fingers snapping off from the sheer strain. But he had no choice in the matter.

"Yes, ma'am..." he nodded dejectedly.



"All right, let's get started!"

Ichika crossed his arms. Before him, Houki, Cecilia, Ling, Charlotte, Laura, Kanzashi, and Tatenashi laid on a blanket. Each was wearing a yukata—it was the very picture of a scene most guys would love to dive right into.

“Let me guess. You’ve all got your date panties on.”

Gulp. Chifuyu had hit home for at least one of them.

“Go change into your swimsuits, you idiots!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“I’m surprised you all brought swimsuits this late in the year.”

Ms. Yamada whispered in an obviously grateful Ichika’s ear, “This ryokan has an outdoor hot spring you’re supposed to wear swimsuits in. Everyone was looking forward to—”

“Ahem! Ms. Yamada, let’s go get a drink. The students can handle this themselves.”

Ichika looked at her, confusedly, as she announced her departure.

“Uhh, Chifuyu?”

“Get to work, Ichika. You’d better do a good job, too.”

The girls were overwhelmed with gratitude toward Ms. Orimura. Like an angel had come down from heaven to bless them.

“Ahh, umm. You know. We’re probably never getting another chance like this, so why don’t you give us an oil massage over our swimsuits?”

A round of assenting thumbs up for Houki.

“An oil massage, huh? I mean, I can do it, but won’t that ruin the blanket?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll pay for a replacement out of student council funds.”

Executive privilege, indeed.

“Ahh, Tatenashi! You’re so generous!”

“Ohohohoho! Anyway, it’s decided! Get going, Ichika!”

“Don’t touch me anywhere funny, though!”

“I haven’t had a massage from Ichika in forever.”

“Ichika, you’re welcome to touch *me* somewhere funny.”

“Uhh, Laura, that’s kinda...”

At least the others could agree with him on that much.

“You’re not too hurt to do this, right, Ichika?”

“Eh, I think I’ll make it through.” Ichika couldn’t shake the feeling that if she were really concerned, she’d let him rest.

“Very well, then, hold nothing back!”

“Can’t I just a litt—”

“Did you say something, Ichika?”

“No! Jeez.”

“Very well then. Do your best, Mr. Masseur!”

“Yes, I’m so exhausted my body feels like mud.”

“Laura, that’s not how that—”

“Let’s just all enjoy this!”

Everyone nodded at Tatenashi’s suggestion.

“Guess I’ll get started, then...” Ichika reluctantly began to oil his hands, and one of the girls gulped in nervous anticipation at the sound. “All right, Houki first.”

“Okay!”

An oil-covered hand stroked over Houki’s thighs. *Squish.*

“Eek! Ichika, warn me before you do that!”

“Warn you? But I said I was starting with you?”

“I know, I just meant... Ahh!”

Ichika’s fingertips relaxed her knotted muscles as his hands glided over her thighs. Houki was so entranced by the sensation that she let out a throaty sigh.

“Ichika! Haven’t you already spent enough time on Houki?”

“I guess so. I’ll start on Cecilia, then.”

“Eh? Wait, wait. I’m not rea— Mmm!” Cecilia moaned in pleasure as she felt the oil spread over her back. Ichika could feel her heart pound through his fingertips.

“Now that I think of it, massaging you like this reminds me of this summer.”

“Mmm! Haa... I suppose...”

Ichika worked his way down her spine little by little, his fingers releasing her tension. She felt as if her body and heart were melting all at once.

“Are you okay?”

“Haa... Haa... Mmmm. Yes...”

As Cecilia’s voice trailed off in pleasure, Ling’s cheeks burned bright red. *I’m next... I’m next...* She couldn’t stop her pulse from racing.

“All right, next!”

Here he comes!

“Tatenashi.”

“Ichikaaaa! I’m gonna kill you!”

“I was just kidding, jeez.” Ichika tickled Ling’s belly to calm her.

“Eek! Ahahahaha! Ichika, sto— stop it, hahahaha!”

“You know, I used to give you massages all the time in middle school.”

As his fingers worked up and down her sides, Ling laughed and laughed, “Stop it, hahaha! Ichika, I’m gonna... I’m gonna kill— Hahahahaha!”

“Hahaha, you’re still so ticklish.”

They were so natural, so open with each other that they looked like the perfect couple. On the other hand, no one else in the room was really enjoying this.

“Ichika, hahaha, let me—hahahaha—let me go!”

“You’re so sensitive, Ling. Anyway, time for the mass—”

“Ichika, that’s enough for Ling!” A thrown pillow caught him in the face. Charlotte was being insistent, for once. “C’mon, Ichika! Hurry it up! It’s my turn now, right?”

“Oh, sure. You don’t have to be mad about it.”

“I am not mad!” Charlotte pouted at Ichika. When she pouted like that, she looked more like a little girl than normal, dependable Charl. Perhaps that’s why Ichika gave her an honest-to-goodness massage.

“Charl, your shoulders are so tense. Are you tired?”

“Mmm... I’m fine... Yawn...”

Her worries melting away under his masterful fingertips, Charl soon drifted off to sleep.

“Zzzzzz...”

“Charl? Did you fall asleep?” Carefully moving so as not to wake her up, Ichika placed a hand on Laura’s hip.

“Wait, Ichika! I’m sensitive the— Mmph!”

Ichika’s fingers kneaded at Laura’s hips. She tried to choke back her gasps, so as not to be heard by Charlotte, but soon she needed to clamp both hands over her mouth.

“Mm! Mmm!”

“Are you okay, Laura? Sure you’re not still hurt from the battle?”

“I... I’m not. Mmm!” It took all her strength not to moan in pleasure. Her blush had extended up to her ears.

“Next, Kanzashi. Have you ever had a massage before?”

“No, but everyone else looked like they enjoyed theirs.”

She couldn’t control her heart—neither its pounding nor the fantasies of what it would feel like. Just as her thoughts reached a fever pitch, Tatenashi murmured to Ichika, “Be careful, there’s some oil there on the floor.”

Sliiiip.

“Whoa!”

It was too late, Ichika had already planted his foot directly in the puddle. *Smoosh.*

“I-Ichika... You’re so daring...”

As he tumbled to the floor, his hand slid down the back of Kanzashi’s swimsuit, and he could feel his palm wrap around one of her buttcheeks.

“Wait, no, I just slipped and—”

“I-chi-ka~ Whatever are you doing to my little sister, hmm?” Tatenashi grinned a Cheshire cat grin.

This must have been a trap she’d laid, he realized too late.

“Ichika! Don’t move!”

“Ichika! I’m jealous— Uh, I mean, that’s so crude!”

“What are you doing, you creep!”

In a second, he was surrounded. Ichika sighed, knowing he had

only one option.

“Run away!” He took off like a startled hare.

“Hold it right there!”

“Ichika, you’re skipping me!”

Ichika pretended he couldn’t hear the complaints. *Anyway, I need to get this oil off of me. I should take a bath.*

Hoping they wouldn’t chase him all the way into the men’s bath, he ducked under a curtain reading ‘M’ and ran inside.

Not noticing that the following letters were ‘ixed.’



“Ahhhhh, this is so relaxing.”

“You sound like an old lady, Maya.”

The two were as naked as the day they were born. And of course, they had the one thing necessary to really enjoy outdoor hot springs—a nice warm bottle of sake.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t have our swimsuits on?”

“I got the staff to close it off just for us. There shouldn’t be anyone else coming in here.” Chifuyu’s gorgeous breasts jiggled as she stretched her arms out over her head.

“Whew, what a sight.”

“.....?” Chifuyu shot back a quizzical raised eyebrow at Yamada’s rapt gaze.

Splash. Someone had entered the hot springs. The two prepared for an attack by Phantom Task.

“Oh, is someone in here? I’m coming in—wait, whoa!” Ichika stopped stone-still—and rock-hard—at the sight of Maya and Chifuyu naked. “What the—”

“Orimura?!”

“Ichika, you little—”

Maya and Chifuyu quickly sunk into the water down to their shoulders to hide themselves, while Ichika, panicking, stood straight up. Maya and Chifuyu’s gazes were drawn immediately to one thing that was its own exclamation point.

“Whoa?!” Claspings his hands over his crotch, Ichika leapt into the water. But it was pointless. They’d already seen it. “Wh-Wh-Wh...”

Ichika turned bright red, stuttering so hard he couldn’t even finish a word. The embarrassment of showing *that* to his sister was too much to bear.

“I-I-I-It’s okay, Orimura...” Just listening to Maya’s voice, he could tell it wasn’t okay at all. Meanwhile, Chifuyu was really starting to feel the sake.

“Hmm. It looks like your IS isn’t the only thing that’s gotten an upgrade. You’re not gonna be a kid forever, Ichika... *Glug, glug.* Maya,

the sake's gone."

"Why are you chugging straight from the bottle?! That's not beer, you know!"

"Hahaha."

"Stop laughing! That isn't funny!"

The situation was rapidly spinning out of control, and just then, another dash of chaos got added to the pot.

"Jeez, where's Ichika hiding?"

"I hear you. Anyway, maybe we can wash the oil off here?"

"I'm sure the student council president will be able to explain it away."

"Then let's get in!"

"Hmm. We should probably take our swimsuits off, then."

"You're right. They're soaked in oil."

"C'mon, everyone, get those swimsuits off! Ms. Yamada already said we have the place to ourselves." The rolling clump of chaos that was the cadets were having a great time.

Ichika, meanwhile, not so much. He didn't know exactly what would happen if they realized he was there, but he knew it wasn't good. *What do I do? When can I get out of here? Where can I go? Why did this have to happen?* As Ichika worked his way through the five Ws, Maya and Chifuyu pressed in from his front and back, pushing him down into the water.

"Glub!"

"Sssh. We've got to keep you hidden."

"Yeah, yeah. Hahahaha."

He didn't really like how much Chifuyu seemed to be relishing the idea, but it's not like he had any other options.

"Oh, it's Ms. Yamada and Ms. Orimura."

"Have you two been drinking?"

"A little bit, ahaha. Having a couple in the hot springs is one of the best parts of being a grown up."

"Yeah! And we're all out now. One of you go get me another bottle, hahahaha!"

"Ugh, Chifuyu's loaded... This is bad."

"What's wrong, Ling?"

"Chifuyu's always a hot mess when she gets into the booze," as Ling tried to explain to the other girls what awaited them, she heard a voice call out to her from behind.

"Ling! Ling, has your chest gotten any bigger?"

"Ughhh... A little bit, yeah, it has!"

"You used to be an A cup, what are you now?"

"...A-plus."

"Ahahahaha! That's a drop in the bucket. Come on, just look

around. How long do you think it's gonna take to fill it like that?"

"Grrr..."



Ling flung a wet towel, and with a resounding *smack*, it caught Chifuyu straight in the face. Normally, this would be unthinkable, but when she was drunk, Chifuyu could take just as much banter as she dealt.

“Hahaha.”

This was not the situation any of them wanted to be in.

“A-Anyway, I’ll go get another bottle!” Charlotte had latched onto this excuse to make herself scarce for a moment.

“Oooh, you’re a smart one. Though I guess this isn’t the first time you’ve bathed with an Orimura, ahahahah.” The reminder was enough to make the other girls’ eyes glint with jealousy.

“A-Ahahaha... Anyway, here you go.”

“Mm. Thanks a ton, haha.”

The escape was a failure.

“And you! Little Sarashiki!”

“Call me Kanzashi...”

“You’re always so damn gloomy. C’mon, lighten up a little. Ichika likes energetic girls, ahahahah.” Chifuyu was on a roll, hitting a new sore spot every time she opened her mouth.

“Houki. You’re all grown up, aren’t you.”

“Eh...?” Houki was surprised by the straightforward praise. “N-No, I’ve still got a way to go!”

It was a spirited yet thoughtful response, but Chifuyu broke out laughing, “Ahahahaha! Those tits get any bigger and you’re gonna need a wheelbarrow.”

“I see...”

Ignoring Houki, Chifuyu took another swig from the fresh bottle of sake.

“Really, Ms. Orimura, that’s not beer.” Maya tried to stop Chifuyu, but she couldn’t move very far while still hiding Ichika. Meanwhile, Ichika, his face wedged firmly between Maya’s ample breasts, found himself trapped between heaven and hell as he squirmed to avoid asphyxiation.

“And how about you, Laura?”

“Yes, Lehrerin!”

“You’re not gonna get any taller, are you. That’s too bad. Ichika’s into tall girls.”

Wince.

“Ah, uh, I see...” Laura wavered for a moment, before finding a counterargument. “But love conquers all!”

“Yeah, that’s the kind of thing you hear from couples right before they divorce.”

Wiiince.

“Ugh...” There was no recovering from that.

Someone whispered ‘that shouldn’t sting *that* badly,’ but it was an obvious lie.

“And you! Cecilia Alcott!”

“Y-Yes!”

Cecilia nervously awaited Chifuyu’s judgment, but only two words left her mouth, “Nice ass.”

Which, well, was obviously true. *At least call them ‘child-bearing hips’ or something*, someone thought.

“A-Anyway, everyone, if you don’t mind? We have grown up things to talk about.” Maya made it politely clear that the girls were no longer wanted, and in a flash, they disappeared. “Phew. Orimura, are you okay?”

Ichika had been freed from the prison of her cleavage, but his mind was already gone.

“Bwuh.”

Thud.

“Hahaha...”

Chifuyu kept drinking late into the night.



“Ugh, I can’t remember anything that happened yesterday.” Ichika rubbed his head on the train ride home.

“Where did you hide, anyway?” Ling asked as she picked at her lunch of grilled eel over rice.

“I wish I could remember.”

“Ugh. Conveniently forgetful again? You never remember the important stuff.”

“Hahaha...”

“Stop laughing like that! I swear, the both of you...”

Just as Ling was at the peak of her complaint, Chifuyu came walking down the corridor and said, “What do you mean, the both of us?”

“Ugh! Chifuyu...”

“That’s Ms. Orimura to you! Anyway, quiet it down, will you? I’m still hungover.”

Yeah. The both of them.

“Anyway, did you all get something for lunch?”

A round of happy ‘yes’es welled up from the girls.

“Daryl’s and Forte’s orders are going to be leftover, though...” No one had really mentally dealt yet with what had happened.

“All right, I’ll eat them then! I’m a growing boy, I need food.” The girls followed up Ichika’s peacocking with their own suggestions.

“Well, if you’re going to do that, I’ll have the red caviar bowl.”

“Why don’t we all share them instead?”

“Oh, good idea, Cecilia.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, why don’t we feed it to each other?”

“It’s my duty to feed my bride!”

“I don’t think that’s really a duty...”

“Ichika, say ‘ahh.’”

“Hey, don’t try to sneak in while we’re still figuring things out!” Everyone but Tatenashi managed the same objection all at once.

As he watched them, Ichika couldn’t help but feel that everything was back to normal for now. Between what he’d heard from Chifuyu about when he went berserk, the questions surrounding Byakushiki, what Tabane was up to, and the battle with Phantom Task... There were a mountain of problems to deal with.

But for now... Ichika just wanted to enjoy this moment.



“Your tea, Tabane.” Aboard Tabane’s mobile lab, Chloe poured black tea into a cup. The sound of the tea gugging from its pot brought Tabane to her feet.

“Awesome, I love your tea! Can I have some konpeito too?”

“As you please.” Chloe spread out some of Kyoto’s famous confectionery on a small saucer. Their rattle piqued Tabane’s appetite even further.

“Ahh, it’s so relaxing to have a nice cup of tea. Oh, hey, what happened to the chocolate yatsushashi Squally brought?”

“It was poisoned, so I disposed of it.”

“Aww, that’s too bad.”

Chloe giggled at Tabane’s visible lack of disappointment and said, “You certainly seem like you’re in a good mood.”

“Mm. I can’t help but be a bit upset that I still can’t wrap my mind around Byakushiki. That one definitely didn’t turn out like I planned.”

“You don’t *look* upset.” Tabane was visibly pleased with herself, and Chloe grinned to match. “Anyway, whatever made you decide to create the IS in the first place?”

Tabane took a sip of tea, and then spoke quietly, “To give girls wings.”

Strength for those without strength. Wings for those without wings. A voice for those without a voice. Created almost as if by providence.

“So, what’s the plan?”

“It’s time to move on to the next phase. Next on the list...” Tabane swallowed the last of her tea, and spoke again. “America.”

She smiled cheerfully.



“Orimu! Welcome backsies, no take-backsies!” No one really had any clue what Miss Casual was going on about.

“We’re back, Miss Casual.”

The members of the student council who’d stayed behind were waiting at IS Academy’s main gate.

“Er, Orimura. Did you really meet Dan in Kyoto?” Utsuho’s normal dispassionate shell had cracked a little.

“Yeah, he said something about a present.”

“He must have meant my birthday present. Ugh, I told him the thought was what mattered!” Utsuho’s frustration was met with jealous whispers from the cadets. “Ah— Ahem. Anyway, Orimura! The class trip is next week, so make sure you don’t wear yourself out before then!”

“Of course!”

“And also, we’ve come to a conclusion while you were gone.”

“Yes?”

“Bananas are not snacks!”

“Y-Yeah...” Ichika couldn’t quite figure out why her expression was so serious.



“Wait, shopping again?” It was the weekend, and as usual, Ichika was out shopping with the girls.

“Problem with that?!”

“Nah, I wasn’t complaining. I need to stock back up on massage oil anyway.”

Houki and the others blushed.

“Wait, so I can get another oil massage then?” Ling’s heart started to pound.

“Eh? Nah, I just promised Chifuyu and Ms. Yamada one to make up for the trouble I caused.”

“Well, you caused us trouble too!”

Realizing they meant the battle with the berserk Byakushiki, Ichika lowered his head apologetically and replied, “Listen, I’m really sorry about that.”

“Ah, er. Really, it’s nothing to be quite so apologetic about.” The smile came back to Ichika’s face as Cecilia hastily smoothed things over.

“Okay. Thanks, Cecilia.”

“Ohohoho, it’s nothing.”

Charlotte glared suspiciously at Cecilia as she said, “Well, you definitely know how to make yourself look good, Cecilia.”

“Ohohoho! I wasn’t even trying to do that.”

“Oh, did you want a massage too, Charl? You should just say so.”

“Eh?! Really, can I?”

“I don’t see why not. How about an aromatherapy oil? I could use an essential oil, too, but...”

“Ehe. I think lavender would be nice.”

Now it was Laura’s turn to glare at Charlotte’s smile. “‘Friends today, enemies tomorrow.’ I see, I see. So that’s who you really are, Charlotte,” Kanzashi chimed in.

“Ehh? No way! I wasn’t trying to...”

“Really?”

When even Kanzashi had something to say about it, Charlotte knew she’d gone too far.

“Make mine rosehip~” Tatenashi giggled as she wrapped an arm around Ichika.

“**What are you doing?!**” Angry objections in 5.1 surround sound.

“Anyway, uh, I’m gonna go check out the oils.”

He ran away. That was something they could all agree on.

“Phew, I made it out of there.”

Even Ichika agreed, to himself. But it was out of the frying pan and into the fire as he saw just who else was at the massage oil counter.

“Oh my. If it isn’t Orimura Ichika.”

“Squall! Er, Ms. Meusel!” Even in this kind of situation, Ichika wasn’t the sort to be impolite to his elders. As he watched guardedly, Squall browsed through the oil selection, an absentminded smile on her face. “What are you doing here?!”

“Well, well. Aren’t you the cautious one. Don’t worry. I’m just here to shop.”

“I can’t beli—”

“What’s so surprising about it? After all, I am a woman.” Squall crossed her arms under her breasts, jerking her shoulders up to emphasize them, and Ichika awkwardly looked away. “Aren’t you the most adorable little thing.”

“Ahh...”

While he was still looking away, Squall pressed up close to him and whispered, “Be careful around Orimura Chifuyu. And especially of Kuramochi Engineering’s plans.”

“What do...” Before he could even finish the sentence, she danced away to the register. Unwilling to follow, Ichika watched her leave. “What was that supposed to mean?”

Now that the question had been raised, suspicions about Chifuyu and about Kuramochi Engineering were beginning to well up in his mind.



“All right, let’s play Old Maid to decide who gets to sit next to Ichika on the train!”

The day before the class trip to Kyoto, Miss Casual had gathered the first years in the cafeteria. Not just the cadets, but the entire class. They were spread out across the entire cafeteria.

“No matter what happens, I—”

Houki was left holding the Old Maid.

“Ohoho. I was born for this!”

Cecilia was left holding the Old Maid.

“Hmph. Is that all you have?”

Ling was left holding the Old Maid.

“C’mon, we shouldn’t be taking this *that* seriously.”

Surprisingly, Charlotte was left holding the Old Maid.

“I’ll trust my instincts!”

Laura was left holding the Old Maid.

“What matters is data and proper analysis.”

Neither of which stopped Kanzashi from being left holding the Old Maid.

As that one cursed card made its way around the circle, Miss Casual suddenly spoke up, “Oh, wow! I’m out!”

After the winners of each table gathered for a playoff, the final winner was Miss Casual.



Meanwhile, Ichika was in his room, going through the prints he’d gotten back from the developer.

“These two, I’m going to need enough of for everyone.” One for each of the girls, one for himself, and one to archive. As he took his notes, one print slipped from his stack and fluttered down to the floor. “Oh, whoops.” Bending down to pick it up, Ichika saw that it was the photo of them all at the station. Alongside them were Daryl Casey and Forte Sapphire. Just seeing their carefree smiles made his heart ache.

“Why...” He knew, now. But knowing was different from understanding. “Just why...”

The only person who heard Ichika’s throaty whisper was himself.



Chapter V: Re:Kyoto! Return to Kyoto

“All right, I’m on my way!” Ichika bid farewell to the student council members who’d come to see him off, and set off alongside Miss Casual.

“Ehehe, I get to sit next to Orimu! Someone up there’s looking out for me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

As they walked along, the cadets looked rather displeased with this course of events. In fact, they were glaring at Miss Casual.

“What really matters is when we get to Kyoto.” It wasn’t clear who had said it, but the idea definitely cheered all six of them up.

“You’re right. That is what really matters.”

“I bet the foliage will be beautiful.”

“I’ve been there so many times it’s basically a second home.”

“The Gold Castle is famous, isn’t it? I’d like to go see it with you.”

“The matcha! I want a real matcha latte!”

“Everyone’s getting so excited...”

They’d already made their way to the platform at Tokyo Station. With every first year coming along, they’d reserved several cars, and there was no need to form neat lines, so instead they just relaxed while waiting for the train. Or at least tried to, unsuccessfully. The reason was obvious: Miss Casual had wrapped herself around Ichika’s arm.

“Hey, hey, Orimu! What are you getting for lunch?”

“Something light. The ryokan we’re staying at is supposed to have really good food.”

“Oh, wow! They have masuzushi from Tomiyama! I need to get some!”

“...You’re not listening, are you.”

Miss Casual was greedily clutching a box labeled ‘genuine masuzushi,’ all without letting go of Ichika’s arm.

“Honne’s so lucky...”

“Isn’t she being a little too clingy?”

“That’s just how she is.”

Miss Casual’s friends sighed resignedly. The big sister who couldn’t tell a lie, and the little sister who could only say what she meant. The Nohotoke sisters from the student council were famous for their forthrightness.

This didn't mean that the cadets were particularly pleased about it, though. However baggy her normal pajama-like clothes were, she had the body of a supermodel. Even her outsized school uniform did little to hide it. Ling and Laura, especially, were worried that he might get a little too used to the extra cushioning.

Dammit, Ichika! Stop drooling all over her!

She's trying to steal my bride!

You could pack a surprising amount of darkness into hearts without much space in front of them.

"Oh, there's the train. Let's board."

The crowd of first year IS Academy students began to line up. As they did, the other passengers noticed their uniforms.

"Oh wow, they're from IS Academy!"

"Wait, that means Orimura Ichika's probably here."

"Where is he?! I've been really into him ever since I saw him on TV!"

"You say that about every guy you see on TV."

"Like you weren't talking for a week about how they get to customize their uniforms."

"That's different! That's because I want to be a designer!"

As the crowd buzzed, the first years walked onto the train like it was a parade.

"Okay, is everyone here?" As the voices of 150 or so of the flower of humanity rose up, Chifuyu nodded.

"Masuzushi! Masuzushi!" In the seat next to Ichika, Miss Casual began to unwrap her bundle of Tomiyama deliciousness.

"Mm? What's with that?" Inside the package was a tiny bamboo box.

"The thing with masuzushi is, you've gotta wrap it up reeeaaaalllll tight to keep the fish fresh."

"I see." As a chef himself, Ichika was intrigued by the prospect of learning about a new dish... Well, at least as someone who did the cooking.

"Can you take the rubber band off for me, Ichika?"

"Huh? Oh, sure." He picked up the masuzushi and slid the rubber band off. And as he did—

"Oww!" It immediately snapped back on his hand.

"Ahahahahaha! That happens to everyone the first time they do that."

"You should've told me!"

The cadets squinted in suspicion at their happy domesticity.

"Why can't Ichika be like this with us?"

"Just because she gets to sit next to him, she thinks she can do whatever she likes."

“If you’re sitting across from them, keep an eye on him.”

“I wonder if he’s really that disloyal.”

“My chicks... I had to leave my chicks behind again...”

“Laura, you can buy those pretty much anywhere.” Laura was the only one with a different reaction, and Kanzashi took it as an opportunity to get a jab in.

And then it was time for another train ride.



“Ahh, it’s so much fun riding the bullet train!” Miss Casual remarked as they got off the train in Kyoto.

“You ate the whole time, Miss Casual. Not that I can complain, it kept me fed too.”

Starting with the masuzushi, she had moved on to a banquet of snacks, drinks, and even some appetizers. Meanwhile, Ichika was a one-man photography crew getting dragged around by the girls in his class.

“Orimura! Take a picture of me!” He’d already gone through two rolls of film just from that repeated request. Traveling with this many women meant he wasn’t going to have much downtime.

“All right, then, let’s—”

Yes, sightseeing in Kyoto! Just as Ichika was ready to go, Chifuyu caught him by the collar.

“You’re doing the photography. At least to start. Go to Kiyomizudera.”

“Got it...”

As Ichika nodded, Miss Casual was the first to catch his hand and said, “Let’s go, Orimu!”

“Sure!”

But if Ichika was going, pretty much everyone there wanted to go too. He shrunk back from the rapidly-forming... less a line. It looked more a great migration.

“Let’s fly, Miss Casual,” Ichika whispered in her ear.

“Mm? Okay!”

As she nodded, Ichika opened Byakushiki and lifted her up before soaring into the sky.

“They ran away!”

“No fair, Miss Casual!”

“Ichika, you cheater!”

Chifuyu, though, chose to overlook this unapproved use of his IS. She must have had her own plan for this.

“Let’s fly too!” Houki was the first to suggest it, and the other cadets opened their own IS, only to be blocked by Maya.

“Remember, that’s against the rules.” She had a perfect, and

perfectly menacing, smile. There was no arguing with that, and the cadets' breath caught in their throats. "If you object, you'll have to get through me first."

The white flag went up. And thus, Ichika and Miss Casual's date at Kiyomizu-dera began.

"Wow, that was quick."

"IS are fast. Was the ride comfortable?"

"Anything would be with your arms around me. And I was inside the shield barrier, so I was fine!"

They'd landed toward the back side of the temple to avoid attention, and there were fewer tourists than expected around. But more importantly...

"There's no one here. What's going on?"

"That's funny."

As they entered the grounds, a woman angrily rushed over.

"You two! What are you doing here?! It's closed for filming! ...Wait, are you Orimura Ichika?!" She was so worked up that it was hard to tell what she wanted.

"Oh, sorry, we didn't know that it was closed. We can leave."

"Wait, hold it! Orimura Ichika, can you be our special guest? People will love it! We'll sell millions! I might even get a raise!" Her voice shaking, the woman pressed a business card into his hands. "I'm Yukizaki Iwana, a talent agent. Pleased to meet you."

She was a competent-looking career woman in her early 30s.

"Ah... Wait, you're making a movie? There's no way I can do that!"

"Don't worry! It's an easy role!" Her words were reassuring, but her handshake was insistent.

"Er, well, um..." Ichika was dragged along, and Miss Casual followed along with him.

"Everyone, I've brought a special guest!" The mood on-set had been tense, but seeing Ichika, the cast let out a surprised cheer.

"No way! It's really him!"

"Mankind's, or at least men's, last hope! Orimura Ichika!"

"Wow, I saw him in a magazine and he looked awesome!"

"Director! Director! Let's change roles!"

"He can be the lead! But Orimura, can I get your autograph? I'm a huge fan! Ahh, this is wonderful! Can I shake your hand?"

The set suddenly livened up, and Ichika was dragged along by the enthusiasm.

"Okay, okay! I'll be the lead!" A wave of applause arose. But the director, a man with scraggly stubble, was shaking his head while 'hmm'ing. "So it won't work? Okay, then, we'll—"

"Okay, you're the female lead!" He suddenly thrust a finger

toward Miss Casual.

“Whaaa?” As she blinked in confusion, he walked up to her and took her hand.

“Writer! You’ve got thirty minutes to fix the script! Stylist! Get them ready! Lighting! I want illumination, not a laser cannon! Sound! Tweak the mics! Everyone else, go back to filming, but be ready!” Amidst the confusion, Ichika and Miss Casual were pressed into the studio bus. Was Japanese cinema really reduced to this?

“All right. IS Academy uniforms look good, so you’re fine in those. A little makeup, and you’ll be set!” An androgynous stylist with rolled-up sleeves ran their fingertips over Ichika’s cheeks. “Oh my. You have fabulous skin. Perfect for makeup. Ahh, such a healthy boy.”

“Y-Yeah...”

“Such a good boy. I hope I still know you in two years.” The stylist winked, and Ichika laughed nervously. “Now you, on the other hand. Why on earth do you wear such a baggy uniform?”

“Because it’s comfy!”

“Ah! That’s no good at all! Fashion needs immediacy—needs impact! You’re a woman, you need to *show* it!” The stylist’s own muscles rippled under tight clothing, though Ichika was unsure what exactly they were trying to show. “Maybe you two *should* change. All right, undress, undress.”

“Umm...” Ichika was flustered by the suggestion, but Miss Casual immediately pulled off her blouse and skirt. “Bwah?! W-W-Wait, what are you doing?”

“Whaaat? They said to undress!”

Ichika was half-panicking as she stood there in her underwear. Her breasts were even bigger than Houki’s. She had the body of a fashion model.

“Oh myyyyy. You’re amazing! This won’t take very much work at all. Ichika, darling, could you step out for a moment? I’ll lay something out for you. Don’t worry, I can tell your size by eye.” The stylist winked again.

Not wanting to just stand there staring at Miss Casual in her panties and bra, Ichika stepped out of the studio bus.

“Whoa...” It wasn’t going to be any less hectic for him outside.

“Can you sign this?”

“Show me your IS!”

“Can I get a photo with you?”

He was being treated like a rock star. But, ever-conscientious, he followed through with everyone... To his own disadvantage, as the director had a flash of inspiration when he saw the IS.

“Now we’ve got you!”

Kiyomizu-dera. Miss Casual, in a formal gown, was being chased

by a group of men in dark suits and sunglasses.

“Give up, and marry me! Gahahaha!”

As the villain laughed menacingly, Miss Casual spoke firmly, “He is the wind. Nothing can stand in his way. And someday, that wind will carry me away.”

Turning, she jumped from the old lover’s leap of the temple.

“What?!” The villain panicked as Ichika, in his IS Byakushiki, swooped down to pluck her from the air.

“Ahh, my beloved! Let me be your wind...”

“No matter how far it carries me! Let my love be my wings, and you the wind which carries them.”

The two soared away into the night sky of Kyoto.

“CUT!!” The director’s voice echoed.

“Good work!” With a round of applause, filming was over.

“Wait, where’d that darling little boy go?”

They really had flown off, and it didn’t seem like they were coming back.

“Ah—!” Cries of dismay welled up from the cast.

“They ran away!” The absurdity of the whole afternoon set in, and they broke down laughing.

“All right, around here should be fine.” Picking a secluded back street, Ichika landed and closed his IS. “Miss Casual, did you want to go back and get your uniform?”

“Mmm. I brought plenty of changes.”

“I see.” A man in a tuxedo, a woman in a gown. They were quite the sight to behold. “Maybe we should fly back to the ryokan.”

As Ichika pondered, Miss Casual spoke up, “You know, Orimu.”

“Mm?”

“You’re always, always there for us. But you should let us be there for you, too.”

Ichika wasn’t prepared for that. Tears rose to his eyes, rolled down his cheeks.



“H-Huh? What are you talking about?”

“C’mon, Orimu.” Miss Casual wrapped her arms around him.

“When it gets to be too much, we can help. We’re all here for you. All of us.”

Ichika nodded, silently, from within her embrace. For a while, they stayed just like that. Only the two would know how tender of a moment it was.



“Where did you run off to, Ichika?!”

After they returned to the ryokan that night, the cadets were lined up with their arms crossed in a room where Ichika sat stoically.

“Well, a lot happened.” Keeping what happened with Miss Casual to himself, Ichika bore the full brunt of the questioning. That was a man’s duty, after all.

“Dinner’s already finished, you know.”

“Explain yourself!”

As Ichika attempted to patch things up, Ms. Yamada interjected, “Now, now. Ichika worked hard today, so I’ve put together something special to reward him.”

“Something special?”

“Yes, something special!” she excitedly replied. Ichika was famished, and definitely liked the sound of that. “All right! You cadets will get to be geisha!”

“...Eh?” A cold glare shot him down before he was able to bemoan that the ‘surprise’ wasn’t just dinner.

“You can get changed in the next room! I’ve got someone there to help you with the kimono.” Ms. Yamada prodded them all into the adjoining room.

Left alone, Ichika was finally able to relax.

“Phew...” He stretched out on the tatami mat, listening to the rustle of cloth from the next room.

“Proper Japanese clothing for a proper Japanese maiden. Meaning, me.”

“Wait, Houki, have your breasts gotten bigger again?”

“Share some of that with us!”

“I wouldn’t mind a little more either.”

“Hmph, I’m fine how I am! They’d just get in the way anyway.”

“Laura, just because they’re grapes and not melons doesn’t mean you have to be sour.”

No matter how many times he heard the girls talking among themselves, he couldn’t quite get used to it. Rolling to his side, he tried to block it out. *I can’t hear them... I can’t hear them...*

Half an hour of endurance later, they finally filed back into the

room.

“Whoa!” Six stunning geisha had entered. Ichika couldn’t help but gulp nervously.

“Anyway, since Ichika hasn’t eaten yet, first things first! Get him dinner!”

As Ms. Yamada clapped her hands, the ryokan’s hostess entered, accompanied by a waitress. And what they were carrying looked mouthwatering: the freshest seafood, the finest produce, tofu made with the crystal-clear local water.

“But first, a drink. Shinonono, if you will?”

“Of course! If I may sit by you, Ichika?” Houki kneeled next to Ichika, perfectly accustomed as a very Japanese girl to movement in a kimono.

“Your glass?”

“Uh, okay... Remember, I’m underage.”

“It’s ramune.”

“Oh, okay.”

The drink bubbled merrily into his red glass, settling with the reassuring hiss of fresh-poured soda.

“Anyway, let’s eat.”

Swigging from the glass, he let the effervescent sweetness soothe his throat. As he exhaled, he felt like all the exhaustion of his day was leaving his body.

“I’m starving. Can I have some of this?” Cecilia sat to his left as he eyed the banquet laid out before him.

“I’ll be feeding you, Ichika.”

It seemed like it was now Cecilia’s turn, as Houki quietly stepped away.

I knew it was a good idea to practice with chopsticks just in case!
Firmly gripping her chopsticks, Cecilia fed Ichika.

First up was whitefish sashimi. It tasted wonderful, it must have been seasoned with a very good soy sauce. The sweet, savory, more than anything rich flavor spread through his mouth.

“This is delicious, Cecilia! You should have some!”

“Ah... No thank you, I...” Cecilia still wasn’t quite accepting of the idea of eating raw fish, but more important to her now was the geisha’s role as a companion.

As she struggled to find the right words, Ichika took the chopsticks from her hand and said, “Here, I’ll feed you. Say ‘ahh.’”

With table service like this, she couldn’t refuse. Cecilia nervously opened her mouth.

“That is delicious!” She didn’t even realize she was saying it until the words left her mouth. That’s how good the whitefish sashimi was. Even the notorious gourmet Cecilia praised it. Though, even more

than the flavor, she enjoyed Ichika serving it to her.

“Ve-Very well, Ichika. Shall we continue?” Picking up another pair of chopsticks, Cecilia fed Ichika the yuba salad. Time seemed to slip away as they ate.

“All right, next is my turn.” Ling kneeled in front of Ichika. At the same time, Cecilia stepped away. “Ichika, I thought a traditional Japanese card game would be just right!”

She pulled out a deck of hanafuda cards made by Japan’s most famous video game company.

“Wait, I thought you didn’t know the rules to this.”

“Ugh!”

As Ling wilted, Ichika looked past her, and spotted a box of Jenga blocks.

“Hey, they have Jenga. Why don’t we play that instead?” Ichika had been really into it in middle school.

“Oh, yeah, you used to love that one, didn’t you.” Ling had also remembered this, and had made sure to leave it there so he had the option.

With that decided, Ling opened the box. It was an exceedingly well-constructed set, ready to go as soon as it came out of the box.

“All right, let’s play rock-paper-scissors to pick who goes first!” With a deep breath only Ichika noticed, the game began. Ling won, and chose to go second.

“All right, I’ll go first. Hmm... How about here?” His choice was anything but safe. Ichika applied everything he’d learned from Chifuyu to his Jenga play. Just like he did in IS battles.

“You still like to show off, huh. Well, I’ve gotta keep up then!” Ling went for a risky move as well. She’d learned, over their years as friends, that this kind of competition was the most fun she could have with Ichika.

Their battle continued until there were only two moves left: one very safe and one extremely dangerous. And now, it was Ichika’s turn.

“All right, time to have some fun!”

Ichika, of course, went for the dangerous one, and Ling yelled in dismay, “Agh! I wanted that one!”

“Don’t yell! You’re gonna make me knock it over!”

“And that would be your fault! Now put that block back!”

“How am I supposed to do that?! Then it’d *definitely* fall over!”

It was just like they were back in middle school, and the others were jealous. They could only imagine what he was like before they met.

“Well then give me that piece!”

“No way!”

“What’s your problem, Ichika, you idiot?!”

“You’re always making it someone else’s fault, Rin, you moron!”

As they were squabbling over the piece, Ling started to stand up, but stumbled and fell on the hem of her kimono.

“Eek?!”

“Look out!” Beside the tumbling Jenga tower, Ichika caught Ling.

Someone let out a sigh of dismay... But just then, Ms. Yamada stepped in to stop things from getting out of control.

“Next is my turn.” Charlotte, in a kimono, approached, carrying a delicious-looking sweet potato.

“Ooh, that looks good. Wait, Charl, what are you sulking about?”

“I am *not* sulking.”

Ichika felt like it was a waste for her to have a pout on her face on one of the rare chances she had to wear a kimono.

“C’mon, how often do you get to dress up like this? What happened to that cute smile of yours?”

“Eh? Wait, *cute? Me?*”

“Totally. Really, I want my cute Charl, like you normally are, back.”

“Like I normally am... Ehehe...” Charlotte started to slowly shuffle toward Ichika, her expression one of perfect bliss. “Anyway, let me feed you. I cooked this sweet potato myself.”

“Oh, wow! Yeah, let’s get into that!” While the other girls were fretting about their own worries, Charl had snuck off to prepare a handmade dessert. Ichika wasn’t sure whether this was amazing or entirely what he’d expect from her.

“Anyway, Ichika. Say ‘ahh.’”

“Ahh!”

As he bit into the sweet potato, his mouth was filled with its sweetness, rich yet delicate. It obviously must have taken a lot of effort to get right.

“What did you mix this with? It’s like nothing I’ve ever had before.”

“Um, after I chilled it, I mixed it with ice grains, then formed it back into its skin.”

“Ice grains? Wow, you’re really clever.”

“If it’s for you...” Ichika watched Charlotte fidget in embarrassment as he enjoyed the sweet potato treat.

“No, really, this is great. Isn’t it, Charl?”

The perfect dessert for his meal. She really didn’t miss a single thing.

“And I’m next!” Laura stepped forward dramatically. With that, Charlotte took what remained of the sweet potato and left.

“I visited a glassblower while I was here, and had them make you this!” Laura pulled out a phone strap with a small glass charm.

“Wow! It’s beautiful!”

“You think so? Isn’t it though.”

“Yeah, it’s a really great boar!”

Laura’s palm caught Ichika upside the face.

“You fool! It’s a rabbit!”

“Are you sure? It really looks like a boar.”

A second slap.

“You double idiot!”

“Oww! Okay, okay! I get it, Laura! I’ll definitely use it, just stop hitting me!” Ichika pulled out his phone and threaded it through the loop. “See? It’s perfect.”

He couldn’t quite think straight in between the slaps, but in any case, seeing it seemed to satisfy her.

“Yeah! It’s perfect!”

Next in line was Kanzashi.

“I... I’ll dance for you.”

An assistant with a shamisen appeared, and Kanzashi danced a traditional Japanese dance. It was bold, vivid, almost unimaginable from the girl whose footsteps were normally so tentative. And it may have been meant for Ichika, but it charmed everyone in the room.

“Wow, Kanzashi. The tea ceremony, flower arranging, traditional dance... You really can do it all.”

“I mean, I *am* a Sarashiki.”

The round of applause as she concluded her performance marked the end of the feast.



That night, after the crowds had cleared, Chifuyu walked through Kyoto’s old city. Pulling out her phone, Chifuyu entered a secret direct connection code. Three seconds later, it picked up.

“What is it, Chifuyu?” The voice was the Unnamed Squad Leader.

“Thanks for sending Maya’s IS, Karen.” She was no longer just ‘Squad Leader.’ Chifuyu had named her Karen Calleria.

“It was nothing. I’m glad it helped.” Karen, the Squad Leader, sounded pleased with herself.

“Are you sure you should have gone that far, though? Even as the leader of the Unnamed, do you have that much free reign?”

“If it’s for you, I can make it happen.” Karen’s tone was nothing but respectful.

Chifuyu was grateful, but still couldn’t manage much more than a wry laugh, “C’mom. We’re equals, right? You can just treat me like a normal person.”

“This is normal for me.”

“I see. Maybe you should take some time to appreciate some

flowers. It'll help you learn about the things in life beyond duty."

"Is that an order?"

Another wry laugh from Chifuyu. Their relationship was almost like that between Tabane and Chloe.

"Anyway, talk to you later, Karen."

"Understood. Thank you, Chifuyu."

"I should be thanking you." Chifuyu laughed again, and ended the call. "...It's cold."

The chill wind blew on her face.



Daybreak. It was morning in Kyoto, and Ichika opened his eyes in his private room at the ryokan.

"Mmm..."

Squish. His fingers were poking into something soft.

"Mmm?!" A sweet aroma filled his nose. Recognizing the scent of a girl, Ichika shot upright in shock.

"Mmm... Huh? Is it morning?"

"Charl! Your yukata, your yukata!"

"Eh? Eeeeeek!"

For some reason, Charlotte was sharing a blanket with Ichika—and her yukata was open far enough to expose her pink underwear. As Ichika pointed it out, she nervously folded it back closed, but it was already too late. He'd seen everything.



“Ichika, you pervert...”

“It’s not my fault!”

Anyway, though, the big question wasn’t whose fault it was: It was what she was doing in his bed.

“Ugh...” He could hear moans rising up from the hall.

“Now what is it?!”

Ichika flung the door open. And there, lying sprawled on the floor, were the other cadets. Their dying message: ‘Charlotte did it.’

“Are you okay?! What happened to you?!” Houki was the nearest to him, and he tried to wake her up first. “Are you okay? What happened?!”

“Well...” Houki couldn’t find the right words. As Ichika inadvertently glanced down, he noticed her breasts poking out from her yukata, and—

“Stop staring, you idiot!”

Smack! He caught a fist to the face.

“Why me?!”

As blood streamed from his nose, Ichika slumped back into unconsciousness.



Turning back time to the night before—

“Bwahaha. With the Schwarzer Hasen Sleeping Drug #5, Ichika won’t realize a thing of what happens tonight. And that’s my chance to...”

Laura was sneaking into Ichika’s bed. But just as she was about to achieve her goal, embarrassment overtook her.

“No, this is okay. This is what people do with their brides. It’s okay! It’s okay... I think.” She clenched her fists in determination. A little too hard, as the tip of her syringe dug into her own palm.

“Ah—” In moments, it had spread through her body, and soon she fell into a deep sleep. “Ugh... At least... At least, let me make it to Ichika’s bed...”

She collapsed on the floor. Soon, her breathing steadied (but definitely didn’t stop).

Meanwhile, in the hallway...

“Gah!”

“Haaa!”

Houki and Ling, the two childhood friends, were doing battle. Less metaphorically, more with live steel. Katana clashed against liuyedao. Both of them would rather die—and this was a real possibility—than yield.

Clang! Clang! Sparks flew as they battled.

“Out of my way! I’ve got a date with Ichika!”

“Too bad! I can’t let you near him with something as dangerous as that!”

Ling was of exactly the same opinion, but no one was there to point that out to them. After a strenuous battle, they both collapsed.

“Well, that was extremely dangerous.”

“Definitely.”

Cecilia and Charlotte had each taken a few blows during the brawl.

“Okay, then...”

“That leaves...”

Sparks flew between Cecilia and Charlotte. Friendship or not, this was a chance neither could let go of. They eyed each other up for a moment. The slightest hesitation and the other’s victory would be assured. Just as the tension reached its peak, Charlotte let out a gasp of surprise.

“Ichika!”

“Er?”

From behind Cecilia, Charlotte smiled like an angel.

“Damn—” Cecilia crumpled to the floor.

And then only Charlotte was left, her fists clenched in anticipation.

“I can finally... Me and Ichika can... Can...”

Imagining the night they’d spend together, she entered Ichika’s room. Spotting him asleep, she tried to hold back her urge to rush toward him. But her heart, and her body, were too honest, and—

“Eh?!” Slipping on something, she face-planted on the floor, knocking herself out and sliding forward under his blanket. Thus was the pile of bodies created.

Meanwhile... Kanzashi was staying up late to catch the last episode of an anime.

“They have to be up to no good.”

She was right.



“Shiny! Breakfast time! C’mon, Shiny!” Ichika was trying to care for the cat Allie had given him, but it had no interest in the cream he’d bought. As he did, the cadets pressed their way into his room. They were dressed in their IS Academy uniforms rather than yukata.

“Ichika, it’s a cat. You can just feed it leftovers,” Houki chimed in from over her bowl of egg on rice. Shiny turned away in disgust.

“Cats have a highly-developed sense of smell. Perhaps it would prefer moi.” Cecilia sprayed on a dash of perfume, then held out her hand to Shiny. To which Shiny ignored Cecilia, and padded away.

“Leave it to me! A cat toy should do the trick!” The words weren’t even out of Ling’s mouth before she pulled one out and tried to get its

attention. Shiny was somewhere between uninterested and disinterested.

“Hmm, it’ll take me a while to make some kibble. Should I?”

At least the word ‘kibble’ got Shiny to perk up for a second. But only for a few moments, until it began to doze off again.

“I know, the Schwarzer Hasen insignia should do it!” No one really agreed with Laura, but no one really disagreed either, so she gave it a try. Not even a glance from Shiny.

“Maybe you should find someone else to take care of it...”

Kanzashi, allergic to cats, chimed in from the doorway.

“What’s going on?” Ms. Yamada, wondering why they hadn’t gotten together yet, had come to check on them.

“.....?!?!”

And seeing her, Shiny leapt toward her.

“Ahh, cats love these.” She had something which looked almost like a nut in her hands.

“Meow! Meow!” It almost sounded like ‘Give me! Give me!’ The nutlike thing was the fruit of the Japanese catnip plant.

“Purrrrrrr...” Shiny rolled around adorably, luxuriating in the scent.

“Well, Orimura. You should give it some of this, but not too much.” Ms. Yamada handed him the fruit and left. And Shiny leapt into Ichika’s arms, firmly decided on where it wanted to be.

“Well aren’t you a crafty one.”

And thus it was finally decided just who Ichika’s roommate would be.

Epilogue: Dragon's Kiss

Up in the penthouse restaurant of a five-star hotel, Phantom Task's Squall and Autumn were welcoming a special guest.

"It's good to have you here, former Italian pilot, Alicia Giosestaf." Squall put special emphasis on the 'former.' She took a sip of wine, then stared at Alicia over the rim of the glass. The woman's red hair was even more vivid than the wine.

"I should make it clear. I'll pass on any assignment which doesn't involve fighting Orimura Chifuyu." Alicia puffed at her pipe as Autumn snapped at her.

"Where do you get the nerve to—"

"Knock it off, Autumn. I agreed to it when I made the offer."

"Yeah, that's the deal. Anyway, let's try to put up with each other."

"Gah!" Autumn frowned and turned away, and Squall reached out a hand to pat her head. The gentle touch was enough to improve her mood. "Hey, Squall! Have you figured out what our next mission is?"

"Of course, Autumn. The plan is called..."

"Operation Excalibur."



"Ring gong... Ring gong..."

An empty void.

A timeless space.

In a world with no day or night, a girl sang.

"Hello baby, I ring the bell."

She sang.

Chanted.

Crooned.

"Daisy, daisy, give me your answer do..."

Her name: Excalibur.

Afterword: Sorry to keep you waiting, Bulldog!

Hi, it's Yumizuru again.

I just realized, it's been a whole ten volumes. We're up to double digits! And I couldn't have done it without my readers. Thanks, everyone!

Oh, also, I got a fan letter that said 'When I was in the hospital, the guy in the next bed recommended your books, and I loved them!' That felt great. It always feels really good to hear that someone recommended your work. And also to hear that someone took the recommendation. It was great. I don't know if there's anything that could make me feel happier.

Anyway, about Volume 10, the anime came first, so I felt a lot of pressure to outdo it. That's why so many things changed. From here on, I'm just gonna think of it as 'the things that happened in the anime happened in the anime, the things that happened in the books happened in the books.'

Speaking of the anime, what did you think of the World Purge arc? It was great, wasn't it? Pretty sexy, too. (Maybe a bit more than just 'pretty.')

Anyway, yeah, I'm really glad about how it turned out!

And about the games. I'm working on something called *Love and Purge*. That title, especially, did it for me. There's a lot of interesting stuff happening in the plot, so check it out! It'll be pretty sexy, too. (Maybe a bit more than just 'pretty.')

And this time, Ichika will be voiced! Do your best, Koki!

So, what did you think of Volume 10? It must have surprised everyone when Daryl and Forte made their return. Especially me. Good job, me! You remembered them! See, foreshadowing's important. (I say, even though I definitely didn't have this planned. Ah well.)

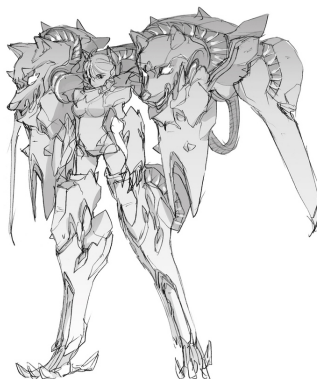
Oh, and the 'meter Mauser' that was in this volume. When I looked into it more, I found out that it was from Hellsing and it didn't actually exist in real life. I was really surprised when I read about it, it seemed so real. I really like Hellsing. Honestly, I love it. Thanks for making something so awesome, Kohta Hirano! I've been a huge fan of yours since *Coyote*! Keep up the good work!

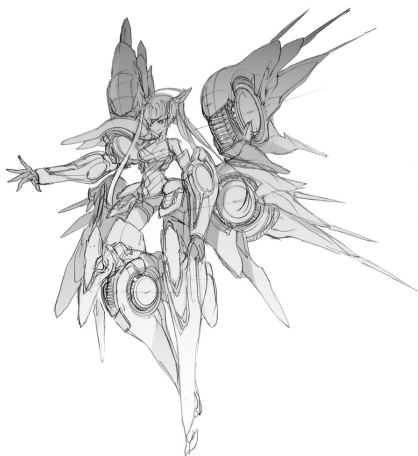
Anyway, in Volume 11 we've got the 'Pierce the Azure Heavens/Excalibur' arc! I've got plenty of new designs in my head to keep CHOCO working hard on!

See you next time!

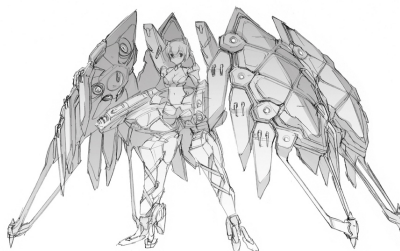


Subject	Mecha Rough Model Sheet	Date
☐ Rough ☐ Cleanup ☒ Afterword		The king pool at the park is open now. There's nothing wrong with Daddy being there taking family photos. Yume The kids pool at the park is open now. There's nothing wrong with Daddy being there taking family photos. Yume Preschoolers wake up really early. They have to, so they can cheer on their favorite Prezents.
CHOCO HIGUCHI KOGICHI		http://chococleanup-Real.com





Subject	Mecha Rough Model Sheet #2	Date
☐ Rough ☐ Cleanup ☒ Afterword		The Jours! editors and Kohta Hirano himself were nice enough to answer my random questions, even when I sent them on weekends. Thanks so much!
CHOCO MUGITANI KOICHI		http://chocoillustration.com



Thanks, Kohta Hirano!

CHOCO



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Infinite Stratos: Volume 10
by Izuru Yumizuru

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Original Japanese edition published in 2015 by OVERLAP, Inc.
This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo
English translation © 2019 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: November 2019

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